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RETURN OF SINBAD By CHESTER S. GEIER

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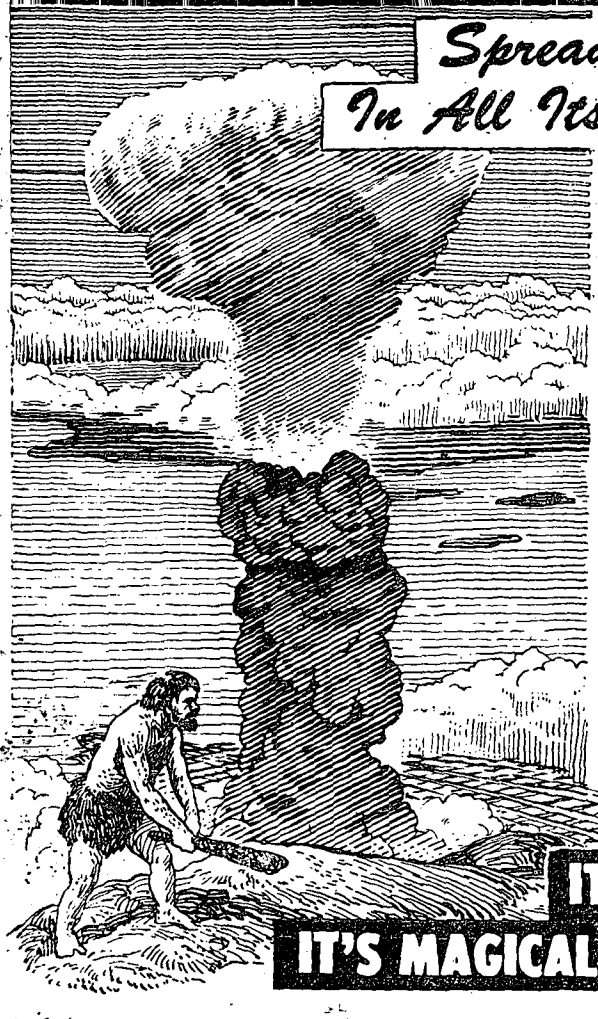

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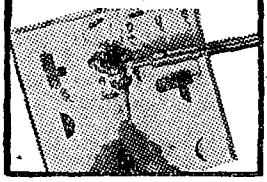

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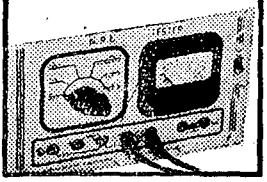

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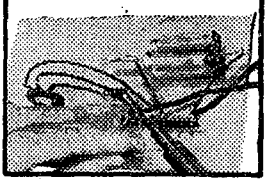

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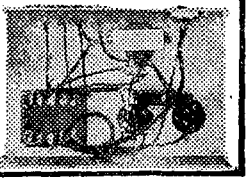

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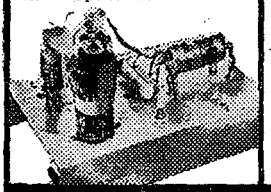

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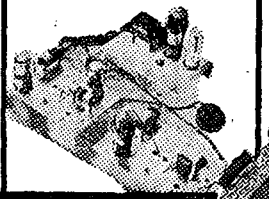

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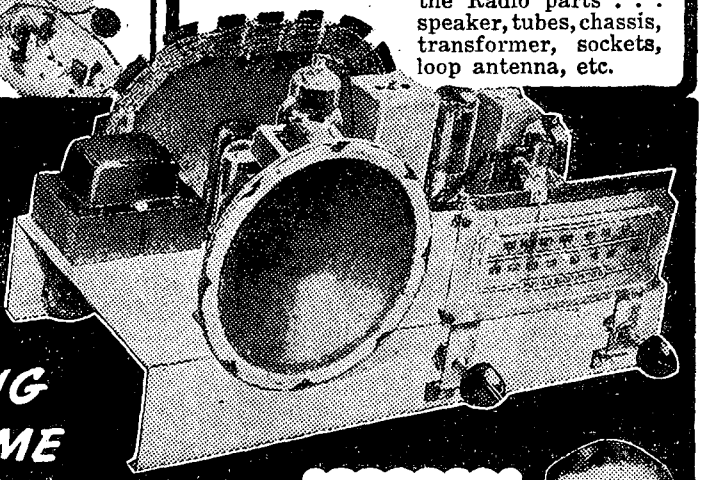

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VOLUME 11 NUMBER 1

All Stories Complete

THE RETURN OF SINBAD (Novel—31,000) ..... by Chester S. Geier 8

Illustrated by Bill Terry

A giant bird swooped out of the sky over Bagdad—and carried Bede to a land of enchantment

THE DEVIL OF DOOM (Novelette—12,000) ..... by A. Morris 64

Illustrated by Bill Terry

Mota gloated from his throne—for would not Talat soon die in the pit of the giant toad? . . .

THE CAN OPENER (Short—7,000) ..... by Rog Phillips 86

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It was a simple little gadget, made for opening cans—without *puncturing* them, of course . . .

THE HAMMER ON THE MOON (Novelette—10,000) ..... by Charles Recour 98

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Jim Benton piloted the first space ship to the Moon, and found it inhabited—by *Earthmen!* . . .

THAT GUY, SATAN, SENDS ME! (Novelette—10,000) ..... by George Reese 118

Illustrated by Brad Pendleton

Slim and the Devil got along famously. And why not? *Hot* music was made to order—in hell!

UNFORESEEN (Short—5,500) ..... by Roger P. Graham 136

Illustrated by Julian Krupa

The robots were built for one purpose; with mankind doomed, *somebody* had to live on . . .

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The Editor's Notebook

A CONFIDENTIAL CHAT WITH THE EDITOR

FOR a long time now you've been after us to get Chet Geier on the ball and produce a new novel. As a matter of fact, we can't begin to count all the letters you've sent us making that request. Well, we want to say that we went right to work and told Chet to get busy with that magic pen of his. And did we get results! Take another good look at the cover for this month. Terrific, huh? You said it! And there it is, right smack in front of you, "The Return of Sinbad," by Chester S. Geier. Shall we tell you what it's all about? Well, maybe not exactly that, for we wouldn't think of spoiling this novel for you, but the very title should give you more than a rough idea of what kind of a story Chet penned. Sinbad—the "Arabian Nights"—adventure—mystery—magic—romance, and every other word you can possibly think of to describe a tale laid in that mythical land. . . . Only Chet seems to think that maybe Sinbad wasn't so much of a myth after all! O.k., that's enough to whet your appetite. Now sit back and get set for some mighty enjoyable reading. And when you finish the story, be sure and drop us a line and let us know how you liked it.

WE'RE also glad to welcome back another old favorite this month. A. Morris, who has been an all too infrequent contributor lately, returns with a swell novelette, entitled, "The Devil of Doom." This is a story of strange people on a strange world. It's a story of evil cunning forces pitted against a pirate of the spaceways. You think that sounds a little peculiar? Well, this pirate wasn't the conventional type. You might even call him a sort of "Robin Hood" instead. And what happened to him when he was captured by "The Devil" is what will make this a swell piece of reading. You'll like it.

ROG PHILLIPS is always big news, so the next story we'll mention will really be a treat. Rog walked in the other day and asked us if we thought a simple can opener was anything out of the ordinary. We knew he had a reason for asking, so we answered by saying, "Not the kind we use, Rog." Well, Phillips grinned and laid a story on our desk entitled, "The Can Opener." So naturally we sat back and read it. When we finished we had to admit that a can opener—at least the kind Rog meant—could be unusual. You don't know what we're talking about? Well don't let that stop you, turn to page 86 and start reading. We'll just say that Rog came through with a really neat idea story, with a nice twist ending that will really smack you.

CHARLES RECOUR has been turning out some really fine stories for our companion magazines, *Amazing Stories* and *Mammoth Western*. Remember his "That We May Rise Again . . ."? And if you haven't been reading *Mammoth Western* you are certainly missing a whale of a lot of fine fiction by the same writers you praise so highly in FA. (Plug for the best western magazine on the newsstands!) Anyway, Chuck returns this month with a swell novelette, "The Hammer on the Moon." It's a story of the first flight of a rocket ship to the Moon. You say this has been done before? Sure it has—but not like *this* story. We guarantee that Recour applied a neat twist to a current idea that is being talked about in newspapers all over the country. But you can decide that for yourself. . . .

THIS month we present a newcomer to the pages of FA. His name is George Reese, and he presents a novelette entitled, "That Guy, Satan, Sends Me!" You'll get a lot of laughs out of Reese's yarn, and you'll do quite a bit of traveling—from heaven to hell in one quick trip! The story concerns a character who is nuts about swing music. Well, when he dies and finds himself in heaven, it is only natural that he wants to join a heavenly band. And that's where his troubles start. Exactly where they end is something you'll have to find out for yourself!

FINISHING up the issue is a great new story by top favorite Roger P. Graham. If you've been a fan of Graham's, you already know that he has a habit of coming up with unique stories. This new one, "Unforeseen," is no exception. The idea behind it is simple enough: Since man as a human, is not a product of perfection, then, is it possible for perfection to exist as a by-product of man's intelligence? Using that as a theme, Roger presents a scientist who created a perfect robot that not only resembled man, but had a mind and will of its own. The problem facing the scientist was a great one, however, because the robot—oops, we nearly spoiled everything! O.k., you can take over from there. . . . Which just about winds up shop for this month. So keep your eye peeled for next month's issue. You'll find some great yarns waiting for you—we're preparing them right now!.....WLH

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The Return Of Sinbad

by Chester S. Geier

Only one man could thwart the evil plans of Meznir, so the mighty Roc hurtled through space and time in quest of—*Sinbad*

THE tiny sportster winged its way swiftly through the cloudless blue sky, its metal surfaces glinting in the hot sunlight. Seated easily before the controls of the plane, Singleton Bade glanced through the cabin windows at the desolate terrain below.

The monotony of the desert remained unbroken, a sea of sand that flowed around occasional outcroppings of bleached rock, stretching flat and bare to the horizon. Bade's reaction to the scene was a wry grimace. After two years in Iraq, he'd had quite enough of desert landscapes. He thought briefly, wistfully, of Oklahoma and Texas, back

Sinbad lunged forward, his fist thudding against Yusuf's bearded jaw.

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while the slaves stared in wild excitement as the overseer staggered . . .

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in the distant United States, where he had obtained much of his experience as an oil well engineer.

With an impatient gesture, Bade pushed his shapeless felt hat back on his dark hair and leaned forward to peer through the windshield. Dark-lensed glasses protected his eyes from the dazzle of sunlight on the sportster's engine cowling.

Far ahead, intersecting his line of flight, was a long dark line. That would be the Euphrates, he decided. Bagdad, the objective of his trip, lay some seventy miles beyond.

Bade's hawkish, spare features, burned almost black by the sun, wrinkled in a frown. A visit to Bagdad was welcome enough, but the whole flight wouldn't have been necessary if the supply plane hadn't failed to arrive. Because of defective equipment, much precious oil was going to waste back at camp. He had radioed the Bagdad headquarters of the American oil company with which he was employed, and he had been told that a plane with the necessary replacements would be dispatched at once. But the plane had failed to put in an appearance. And to make matters worse, the radio at camp had been damaged in an accident, leaving Bade with no recourse but to fly to Bagdad, to find out what was wrong. He was glad he had insisted that a private plane be put at his disposal against just such an eventuality.

Glancing at the chronometer on the instrument panel, Bade figured quickly. He would arrive in Bagdad in another half hour or so. It was not too soon to satisfy him, though he knew the journey would have taken much longer by automobile.

He realized his impatience was due to the fascination that the famous old city had always held for him. This fascination was one of the main reasons why he had taken the oil company job in Iraq. As a boy he had saturated himself in the glamorous tales of the *Arabian Nights*, and their enchantment had never left him. Bagdad, scene of many of the tales, had become as revered by him as is Mecca by the devout Moslem.

Nor had he ever been able to escape the feeling that there was some sort of a bond between the city, certain tales in the *Arabian Nights*, and himself—a bond of which his very name seemed a link. His intimates often shortened his first name, Singleton, to "Sin," and in combination with his last name, the whole required little effort of the imagination to become "Sinbad." Even his appearance had a strong Arabian quality, for he was lean, dark, and hawkish of features. He had often been mistaken for an Arab, especially since he had learned to speak Arabic like a native.

BADE was jolted from his musing as a shadow suddenly darkened the interior of the plane. It vanished almost as soon as he became aware of it. He peered around him in bewilderment. There were no clouds. Only another plane could have thrown such a shadow, but—

The interior of the cabin darkened again.

Bade leaned toward the windshield, peering upward. His body stiffened in amazement. The object casting the shadow was neither a plane, nor a cloud. It was an enormous bird—a bird fully as large as a bombing craft!

The monster soared some fifteen or twenty feet above Bade's sportster, moving effortlessly and yet with a speed greater than that of the plane. It swept past, then curved around in a great half-circle that would take it over the sportster once more.

Staring alternately through the wind-

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shield and side windows, Bade incredulously followed the flight of the huge bird. He had a nightmarish sensation of unreality. Never before had he seen anything like this impossible creature gliding on vast wings through the air. He had never even known that such a giant existed—except in one place. In the *Arabian Nights*.

But this wasn't the *Arabian Nights*, he told himself. This was modern Iraq. And in modern Iraq were no such things as flying carpets and magic lamps, no such things as Genies or Efrits—or rocs, one of the mythical winged creatures which the monstrous bird seemed to be.

Yet Bade knew he was gazing at something that couldn't be a delusion. The feathered colossus was solid and substantial enough to have cast a shadow.

Bade tensed as the monster returned toward the plane. Its huge head was cocked to one side, and the eye that was visible seemed to glitter with an amazement as great as Bade's own. Then the cabin darkened as the bird glided by overhead.

Again it circled to approach the plane—but now it dipped down to the level at which the sportster was flying. Abrupt dismay surged through Bade as he noted the maneuver. Was this the prelude to an attack?

He didn't wait to find out. Settling himself quickly before the controls, he sent the sportster climbing upward, revving the engine to obtain every bit of available speed. In his mind he began raking over the dogfighting tricks he had learned as a pursuit pilot during the war.

The roc—Bade found himself thinking of the huge bird by that term—wheeled sharply to follow the sportster's altered path. There seemed little doubt about the giant's intentions now. It was more than merely curious about the plane. Evidently it saw in the sportster an enemy or rival whose very existence was a challenge to combat.

With mighty surges of its huge wings, the roc overtook the plane—passed it. To Bade the monster's speed seemed incredible. He wondered how fast it could fly when it put forth real effort.

In the next instant he returned his attention frantically to the controls. The roc had wheeled again. It was coming directly at the sportster now, its clawed feet raised to seize and rend.

Bade sent the plane into an abrupt dive that took it beneath the roc and then beyond as he leveled out. The evasive tactics of the plane seemed to enrage the feathered giant. It beat furiously at the air as it turned to follow, its great curved beak open, its huge eyes flaming.

ONCE again it attacked, and once again Bade slipped the sportster from within reach. Anxiety was deepening within him. He knew he couldn't keep up his flight indefinitely. The plane hadn't been built to take prolonged rough handling.

The attacks grew swifter, more reckless. Lines of strain gouged Bade's face as he fought to keep the plane from contact with the maddened roc's huge beak and talons.

And then, darting under a particularly swift rush, Bade found he hadn't been fast enough. The spinning propeller brushed against one of the roc's clawed feet, crumpling into a useless mass.

Dismay gripped Bade with an icy hand. Then, as the sportster started to go into a spin, he began working desperately to glide the craft down to a landing.

The bite of the propeller apparently had registered upon the roc, startling

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it out of its anger. The creature made no immediate move toward the plane. It flew in great slow circles, watching the sportster descend.

Bade was relieved to note that the roc had temporarily abandoned the struggle. He gave his full attention to landing the plane. Hunched tensely before the controls, he fought to bring the craft down on a long slant. He knew that a crack-up was unavoidable. The sand here was too loose to permit the wheels to roll. All he could do was to slow the sportster as much as he possibly could.

To Bade's anxious eyes, the ground seemed to come up much too swiftly. He felt the wheels touch the sand and then dig in. He twisted sidewise in the seat, crouching, one hand pressed against the floor. The nose of the plane dipped, touching the sand. The tail assembly reared into the air. For a moment it seemed that the craft would turn a complete somersault, but then it slipped heavily to one side, the wing folding back with a tearing and rending of metal.

Bruised and shaken, Bade climbed from the wreck. He surveyed the remains of the sportster bitterly and then glanced up at the sky.

The roc was still circling. It had descended for a closer view of the ground, and its great eyes seemed to stare at Bade in astonishment, as if wondering in what weird manner the plane had gorged him up.

Bade shook a vengeful fist at the monster. "You overgrown buzzard!" he said. "What I wouldn't give for an anti-aircraft gun right now!"

In another moment he wished he hadn't spoken, for as though drawn by the sound of his voice, the roc began gliding down toward him. It came with what seemed express train speed, growing larger instant by instant.

Bade turned wildly and began to run, knowing even as he did so how hopeless the effort was. He heard the beat of mighty wings, saw the sand darken under his straining legs. And then a pair of scaly clawed feet that were each as large as the scoops of a steam shovel closed around his body. He felt himself lifted from the ground, drawn up and up with a swiftness that made his mind reel. The earth fell away. The wrecked sportster below him dwindled to the proportions of a toy. Smaller and smaller it grew, until it became only a speck against the vast, flat expanse of the desert.

And still the mighty wings threshed at the air. Bade fought for breath in the wind that rushed past him, rocking under the surges of giant muscles.

Faster and faster . . . higher and higher. Bade had wondered how fast the roc was able to fly. Now he knew. But the immediate fact of what was taking place left no room for astonishment.

There was no room even for ordered thought. Bade gasped and choked in a roaring cataract of air that seemed to hammer at him with hurricane force. His senses blurred under the numbing thrust of the frightful speed at which he was being borne. Earth and sky melted into a vague, spinning chaos. He had the sickening impression that he was falling, falling endlessly, whirling around and around like a feather in the grip of a cyclone.

Faster, still faster . . . a roaring and a rushing of tremendous winds . . . a grayness without form or feature that yet was somehow instinct with *life,* pulsing, flowing, echoing to the throb and thunder of momentous events. Beyond that grayness civilizations that had been dust flowered anew; voices that had been stilled clamored again.

Dimly, through the flame-shot darkness filling his mind, Bade sensed this. Dimly he understood. Then an im-

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mense black hand seemed to snatch away his last remnant of consciousness.

CHAPTER II

SLOWLY Bade became aware of sunlight pressing like warm fingers upon his closed eyes. He opened them, then closed them quickly against a flood of brightness that bit like acid. Presently, goaded by his sharpening awareness, he sat up.

He glanced about him, questions beginning to stir in his mind. He saw that he had been laying upon a stretch of sand, near the base of a rocky peak. Before him the sand sloped down to an expanse of white beach, against which long, lazy waves of blue water broke gently.

Shock pulled him staggeringly upright. *Water!* A great sea of it, spreading to the horizon! The sight didn't make sense. His last impressions seemed to be those of a desert. There had been no body of water this size anywhere near.

And then full memory returned. He recalled being forced down in the sportster as the result of a weird duel with an enormous bird that couldn't possibly have existed anywhere but in certain Arabian legends. Yet the bird—the roc—had been real enough. It had taken him captive, carrying him through the sky with frightful speed. He remembered the experience with the sense of unpleasantness and confusion that one remembers a nightmare.

In a vague yet insistent way, Bade felt there had been something strange and incredible about the flight. He thought of the pulsing, vibrant grayness through which he had passed, and somehow he was certain it had been due to more than just the effect of speed and pressure upon his senses. A chill of awed wonder touched him. Had the roc's flight taken him through space, or through something else . . . something that might have been—*time*? Impossible as the idea appeared, it was the only one that explained the presence of the huge bird in modern Iraq.

Thought of the monster made him scan the cloudless blue sky uneasily. No moving objects were visible, but he was only partially reassured. He turned to the rocky peak behind him, saw it wouldn't be difficult to scale, and made his way over to the rock-littered base. He began to climb. Reaching the crest, he shaded his eyes with one hand and peered about him.

He saw now that he was situated upon a tiny island. It was rocky, covered with a sparse growth of grass and palm trees. He could find no signs of human habitation, nor did the roc seem to be present. A dread struck him at the knowledge that he was hopelessly marooned. There appeared to be no way off the island. He would be at the roc's mercy if it returned—and he felt certain it would. Even if he did manage to escape the monster, the problem of food and water made his future a bleak one.

Trying to shake off his forebodings, Bade searched the sky again. He stiffened as he saw something that hadn't been visible before. It was a tiny black shape, little more than a speck against the blue, but growing swiftly larger. Within instants, it seemed, the shape took on recognizable outlines. It was the roc, Bade became positive, returning to the island. Remembering the incredible speed at which the giant bird was able to fly, he knew it would arrive very soon.

His spare face grimly anxious, Bade hastily descended the peak, sliding to a stop among the debris strewn along the base. He sent his eyes darting about him. He had to find a hiding

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place of some kind. Quite probably the roc had brought him here to make a meal of him, and he didn't feel in a co-operative mood.

HE BEGAN running along the peak base, slipping repeatedly in the loose rubble. The ground abruptly rose in a steep slope. He thought of skirting it, but decided it was safest to remain close to the peak. He climbed hurriedly. Near the top a rock turned under his foot. Clutching for balance at a stone projection that tore free in his grasp, he went rolling down the slope in a small avalanche of sand and pebbles.

Shaken, dazed, he scrambled back to his feet. He realized he had lost precious ground and swore weakly. The roc was already looming large in the sky. Within seconds it would be directly over the island.

Ignoring the bruises collected in his fall, Bade now followed his first impulse and started running around the slope instead of attempting to climb it again. He barely reached the peak base once more when the roc soared down.

He glanced frantically about him as he ran, but he could see no means of shelter as yet. Then, as his pistoning legs took him around a sharp angle in the peak base, he saw ahead of him a deep cleft or opening in the rock wall. At almost the same time, he heard the threshing of huge wings, and the ground darkened about him.

Throwing his remaining energy into a supreme effort, Bade hurled himself at the cleft. Scant instants after he ducked within it, he heard the scraping and grinding of the roc's huge claws in the gravel outside as the monster landed.

The cleft appeared deep, though narrow. Bade's eyes, still adjusted to the glare of sunlight, could make out little of the interior. He guided himself forward by running his palms along the walls on either side.

The cleft abruptly widened into what could only have been a cave. Not until then did Bade feel safe. He drew a deep breath and glanced back toward the opening.

The cleft was darkened by the huge shape of the roc. Head cocked to one side, a glittering eye visible, the feathered giant was peering intently within. There seemed something anxious and impatient about the creature. For some strange reason it showed no anger over Bade's escape.

Nor did Bade wonder about that. He was safe for the moment, and this was all that mattered.

His calm was blasted as a voice spoke from the depths of the cave, behind him.

"Now, by Allah, how is this? I thought Yasmina had finished you murdering dogs."

The voice was soft, yet held an edge of repressed, cold rage.

Bade whirled with a gasp. "What the devil . . .!" Straining his eyes against the gloom, he saw that the cave was occupied by a number of dim shapes. Most of these seemed rectangular and immobile, apparently boxes or bales of some sort. Seated upon one of them was the vague figure of a man.

Bade felt quickly through his pockets. He found a box of matches and struck one. In the sputtering glow he saw that he was in a cave as he had sensed, its dimensions approximately those of a large room. The seated figure was watching him with a bleak quietness, eyes narrowed against the flare of the match.

Bade discovered that his companion was a youth rather than a man, slender and handsome—and bound in chains. He wore a white turban and a brocaded sleeveless jacket over a shirt of blue

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silk, bound at the waist by a scarlet sash. His legs were covered by flowing trousers, fitting tightly at the ankles, and his feet were shod in narrow shoes of maroon leather, with pointed, upcurled toes.

There was a quality about the garments that Bade found disturbingly odd. They were Arabian in flavor—yet anachronistic. He thought again of his impression that time had somehow been involved in his flight as a captive of the roc.

THE match went out. Bade struck another, and as the glow steadied he became aware that the youth was staring at him with a puzzled intentness.

"What manner of a man are you?" the other asked slowly. "You do not seem to be one of the thrice-cursed sea jackals who were left to guard me. You must be a magician—or a jinn."

The youth's Arabic had an odd quality, too. Bade was familiar with the language and knew the various dialects.

He grinned at the youth and shook his head. "I'm not a magician or a jinn, just an ordinary human being. And I most certainly have nothing to do with keeping guard over you."

The youth's fine-chiseled features appeared doubtful. "I have never seen anyone with clothing such as yours—nor with those little sticks that make fire so easily. Where are you from?"

"America," Bade said. He found himself waiting tensely for the other's reaction.

"America? It must be a very distant land, of which I have never heard. But how did you get here?"

"There's a bird outside as big as a house. It carried me here through the air—or through something more than air, if the experience hasn't affected my mind."

"Yasmina brought you?" the youth gasped. "By Allah, now I begin to understand!"

"Yasmina?" Bade echoed in bewilderment. "You mean that overgrown buzzard is a pet?"

The youth nodded quickly, smiling for the first time. "A very clever one. Yasmina removed the pirates who had been guarding me, but she was not able to take me from this cave. She seems to have brought you here for that purpose. Perhaps she thought you were a magician and would thus do her bidding without fear."

"You may be right," Bade said. "I was . . . well, flying through the air when I first saw Yasmina. This may have made her think I was a magician."

The other stared. "But if you can do that, then you must be!"

"To be more accurate, I was flying in a machine, an airship," Bade explained. "They are common in my land, not magic. You must have heard of them."

"Allah be my witness, stranger, I have not. Tales of flying horses and magic carpets I have heard—but not of ships that fly. I do not doubt that there are such things, for El Khad has taught me that the impossible is only what we do not know or understand."

"El Khad?"

"He is the vizier of Jahlad, an old man and very wise. He is a magician, though he does not like the word. He says it is used by the ignorant to describe what is really a vanishing art."

"Vizier . . ." Bade muttered. He struck another match thoughtfully. A vizier, he knew, was a minister of state, an important official. For the youth to be acquainted with one meant his own position must be quite high.

Bade studied the slim, exotically dressed figure a moment, then asked, "Are you related to El Khad?"

The other shook his turbaned head. "I am Tarnib, prince of Jahlad," he

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said simply. "Who are you, stranger?"

"You can call me Sin Bade."

"Sinbad, eh? Well, Sinbad, our meeting seems a fortunate one—at least where I am concerned. It is now possible for me to leave this place. I have been here since yesterday and had begun to lose hope."

"What do you want me to do?" Bade asked.

"You might carry me outside," Tarnib suggested. "These chains seem too secure to remove, but possibly Yasmina can take care of them."

Bade hesitated. "She might take care of me as well."

"I swear by Allah that you will not be harmed. Yasmina obeys my commands, but even so she would not touch anyone who bears me friendship."

Bade finally shrugged. He tossed aside the remains of the present match and went to where the youth sat. The other was not heavy. Bade gathered him up easily enough and strode toward the cleft opening.

The roc was waiting, still peering within. As it caught sight of Bade and his burden, it began shifting its huge bulk in excitement.

THE giant bird moved back as Bade emerged from the cleft and into the sunlight. It touched Tarnib with its beak, as though assuring itself that he had not been hurt.

Depositing Tarnib carefully upon a convenient rock, Bade stepped back. He was not entirely sure about his status with the roc.

Tarnib glanced at the bird and held out his chained hands. "Come, Yasmina. That sharp beak of yours should make short work of this."

Carefully, almost daintily, the roc caught the chains in the tip of its great beak—and bit. The chain parted. Rubbing his wrists, Tarnib now indicated his ankles. The chains there, too, fell away.

Tarnib stood up and stretched, his grin of delight showing white teeth that were small and even. "Free!" he exulted. "Free, by Allah!"

He was somewhat under average height, slim, and almost delicately formed. His skin had a clear, golden tan, and his eyes, Bade discovered, were blue and long-lashed. An odd expression came into them as they turned presently to Bade and sharpened with an awareness of his gaze. It was an expression that seemed wary, secretive, and somehow overlaid with . . . mockery. But it was fleeting. An instant later Bade was not sure of what he thought he had seen.

In the bright silence the waves murmured gently as they broke in soft fragments against the white sand of the beach. Still vaguely disturbed, Bade glanced from Tarnib to where the roc squatted a short distance away. Head cocked to one side, it was watching with a kind of ponderous maternal patience. He gazed past the creature and out over the sea, to where the limitless and placid stretch of blue ended in a clear, straight line against the lighter blue of the cloudless sky. A warm breeze touched his face, and unconsciously he found himself savoring the fresh, tangy odors it brought.

And abruptly the utter bizarreness of the scene swept over him. He had an almost overpowering feeling of shock, of—instability. He wasn't here on this remote island. He couldn't be. He was in the sportster, flying over the desert stretches of Iraq, toward Bagdad. Or—perhaps that had only been a dream. Perhaps he would awake on his cot at camp and find that he had suffered the delusions of fever.

The breeze touched his face again. The murmur of the waves on the beach

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held a sudden note of irony.

He squeezed his eyes tightly shut and pressed his palms, hard, against his cheeks.

Footsteps scraped against gravel. He felt fingers close upon his shoulder. Tarnib's soft voice said, "What is wrong, friend Sinbad? Are you ill?"

Bade drew a deep breath. "I'm all right," he said. "But . . . but I think Yasmina has brought me to a different time."

"Of course," Tarnib said. "That has become clear to me."

CHAPTER III

BADE had a long talk with Tarnib about his location in time. There were difficulties. Terminology and standards of measurement were the most serious, but at last Bade became certain that his flight with the roc had ended in the early Middle Ages.

It was the period when Bagdad was the greatest metropolis of the East. Wars had not yet ravaged it, leaving upon its successive ruins the drab and ugly mud-brick city of Bade's time. The sun had not yet burned the fertile green of its surrounding fields into arid sand.

Bagdad was still the splendid city of legend. It was a city of marble and alabaster, of rainbow-hued tiles and gold-covered domes, of lace-like carving and intricate ironwork. Silk awnings rippled in the breezes that roamed its bustling streets. In cool, walled gardens the singing of nightingales mingled with the tinkling of fountains. Its great bazaars were a riot of sound and activity as hordes of merchants haggled over their wares.

For Bagdad was a mighty heart of trade, pumping a constant stream of infinitely varied goods to all parts of the then-known world. The shipments that passed through it ranged from lowly woolstuffs and brassware to costly spices and rare gems. Ivory and jade, porcelain and fragile glass, rugs and rich fabrics, oils and pigments, frankincense and ambergris, sandalwood and cedar—all these were a part of the flow.

It was a feudal age. The vast territory beyond Bagdad was broken into dozens of tiny tribal states, kingdoms, caliphates, and principalities. Wars were frequent. Robbers and pirates were numerous and bold.

A vivid picture of the time formed in Bade's mind at the realization of where he was. For an instant he felt a deep excitement. Then the full implications of his predicament dawned upon him. He turned anxiously to Tarnib.

"If Yasmina was able to bring me here, it should be possible for her to return me to my own time."

Tarnib nodded. "It is possible. You see, friend Sinbad, Yasmina has the ability to travel through time. This is not an accurate statement, for time is not what we commonly consider it. Actual time is what might be called a state of *being,* where everything that has existed still exists, and where everything that will exist already does. We travel through this state, this actual time, and we measure the periods between our experiences in it according to such standards as are available to us —the changes of night and day, the changes of seasons. We call this system of measurement time, but it is only a system of measurement. It has no reality."

"I don't understand," Bade said. "If we travel through actual time, measuring the periods between our experiences in it, that is the same as measuring actual time."

"But actual time is a state of being," Tarnib returned. "Everything in it is always there. We can measure, ac-

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cording to some sort of standard, the periods between things in it—but this is not a measurement of actual time itself. It is like trying to measure the world in units of time."

THE youth leaned closer, blue eyes narrowed intently. "Look, friend Sinbad, imagine actual time as a road—a very long road. Placed at intervals along that road are certain things—markers, perhaps. As we travel along the road, we encounter one marker after another. The sun rises and sets, the seasons change. We use this to measure the periods between our encounters with the markers. We say there is a difference of three days between some markers, and five years between others. We call this time.

"But actual time is the portion of the road that we have traveled, and all the markers along it. They are always there. Nothing changes. The things along the road only seem to change as we pass them, one after another, but each remains the same."

Bade nodded slowly. "I begin to see what you mean. You're trying to tell me that actual time is a sort of world—a much greater world. We travel through this greater world, and from our experinces in it we construct a smaller world that has no reality except to us. A world that is . . . an illusion."

Tarnib flashed a grin. "That is it, by Allah!"

"It makes sense—yet it doesn't," Bade added with a frown. "This idea of actual time means that the future is fixed and predetermined. We cannot change things. And that is wrong. For we do change things. Everything we do has an effect upon the future."

"True enough, friend Sinbad. But in actual time *everything* already exists. Any changes we can possibly make have already been made. Our actions merely shift us to those conditions in actual time where the changes that grow out of them already exist."

"You mean actual time covers even probability?"

"Yes. For actual time is not one road, but a vast system of roads, crossing each other and placed one atop the next. Our actions take us along many different roads. They may be very small and unimportant roads, or very large and important ones. The actions of individuals with great power of one kind or another may shift to different roads everyone traveling with them. This creates what is in effect a small world within the vastly greater world of actual time. There are very many such small worlds."

"Planes of existence," Bade muttered. He rubbed the back of a hand dazedly over his forehead.

"El Khad has used that term," Tarnib said. "He explained all this to me, you know, and I can tell you it was a difficult task getting it into my head! According to El Khad, all that I have told you is very ancient knowledge. And this knowledge is vanishing. Only a few now possess it and know how to use it. They are called magicians or sorcerers—or worse."

Bade sat erect in sudden tension as a thought occurred to him. "This picture of actual time is complicated. That must be why you said it might be possible for Yasmina to return me to the period from which I came. You didn't say she definitely could."

Tarnib nodded reluctantly, glancing away in evident discomfort. "She seems to have stumbled upon you by accident, friend Sinbad. She is clever, but I do not know if she can return you to the identical road in the system that makes up the world in actual time which you left."

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"But she was able to return here," Bade pointed out. "If she can do that, she ought to be able to take me back."

"She is familiar with the system that makes up this world in actual time," Tarnib said. "Like a true bird, she has an instinct that leads her to the place she regards as home. She has not developed this instinct where your world is concerned, and thus in trying to return you, there is the danger that she might mistakenly take you to what was only a probability-world—a parallel system which seems like the one you came from, but which has beginnings leading to a different system in the future. You would not . . . fit."

BADE nodded slowly, glancing in wonder at the roc. "How she is able to do it is more than I can imagine."

"Yasmina is not a creature of this world," Tarnib explained. "She is from a system that goes beyond even probability—what is called another plane of existence. It is a system in which living things have followed a much different pattern of development.

"Yasmina has strange powers. One is the power to travel at will through the different systems in actual time. She is able to pierce the veil between them because of a sound she makes in flight—a sound we cannot hear or feel. It is like the sound which is able to shatter a goblet of thin glass."

"A vibration. . . ." Bade said softly.

"Yasmina seems to have wandered into this system when I was much younger," Tarnib went on. "El Khad captured and made a pet of her. He wanted to study her principle of flight between systems. This principle was already known and used in a limited way, and El Khad hoped to improve on the ancient knowledge. He and other students had long been able to penetrate the veil between the nearest systems. That is why we have tales of jinni, efrits, demons, and other weird creatures not of this world."

Bade thought of all the mythical monstrosities with which he was familiar, realizing now that they had origins in fact rather than fantasy. Then the thought faded, and once more his problem was uppermost in his mind.

"This matter of returning me to my own world can't be impossible," Bade told Tarnib. "Not since so much seems to be known. There ought to be a way to locate the exact period I left."

"El Khad may be able to do it," Tarnib said. "He is very wise."

Bade rose eagerly. "I've got to see him, then. Can Yasmina carry both of us?"

Tarnib nodded, rising also. "Easily. I, too, am anxious to go to Jahlad. I have been worried about affairs there. The attack upon me by the pirates may have had deeper reasons than appear on the surface."

"What sort of reasons do you mean?"

"Political reasons, friend Sinbad. You see, the pirates would have feared to attack me unless they had the protection of someone who was equal to me in power. Such as another prince. Otherwise they would have risked being hunted down and executed. I think I know who is behind them." Tarnib's slender features turned grim. "We will leave for Jahlad at once."

Bade hesitated, glancing back toward the cleft opening. Recalling the boxes and bales he had seen inside, he gestured. "What about the things in there?"

"They are not important," Tarnib returned. "They merely consist of provisions and equipment from my ship. The pirates looted the vessel of them before they sank it. Fortunately, I had just been taking a pleasure cruise, and

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so carried nothing valuable. I often go on such cruises."

"Unescorted?" Bade said.

The youth shrugged and grinned. "I dislike being followed about by soldiers. There is no adventure in it."

Bade grinned back understandingly. He felt liking grow within him. For a prince the other had spirit and daring.

Prince. . . . Bade felt a belated surprise over the title. Here on this lonely little island rank had meant little up to now.

He broke from his musings as he saw Tarnib gesture and stride toward the roc. The youth spoke a brief command, and in response the great bird spread one huge wing as a sort of ramp. Tarnib mounted by this to the roc's back.

"Come," he said, beckoning to Bade.

ABANDONING his last shreds of caution, Bade followed. When he and the youth were firmly settled in their places at the back of the roc's towering neck, the monster rose, spreading its vast wings. It ran for some distance along the beach, its wings moving more and more rapidly. Then, even more easily than a plane would have done, it breasted the air.

Higher it rose, and higher. The island fell away, dwindling to saucer proportions. The sea took on a smooth, glassy look.

Bade clung to the great feathers under him as the roc's speed increased. Air roared past his ears. The lash of it stung his eyes, sent his hair streaming behind him.

After a while his arms and fingers began to ache from the intensity of his grasp. He glanced at Tarnib and saw that the youth was relaxed and confident. Noticing his gaze, the other smiled, white teeth flashing. He shouted against the rush of air.

"Is your airship better than this, friend Sinbad?"

"Not much better." Bade tried to conceal his unease by squinting ahead. Presently he saw a dark line appear against the horizon. It grew swiftly, taking on detail. Hills appeared, and then a long curving line of white beach. Further back along the beach palm trees became visible.

Within moments the roc began dipping downward. It turned toward a point of land beyond which the distant towers of a city glittered in the sunlight.

"That is Jahlad," Tarnib announced, pride shining in his face.

Bade peered intently at the city. It was small and almost fairy-like, a vision of slender minarets and pointed domes. It seemed less a picture of reality than one taken from a book of tales of the *Arabian Nights*.

And then, as the roc soared over the point of land, Bade discovered that a ship was anchored just on the other side, having previously been concealed from view. A rowboat was drawn up on the beach beyond. Near the edge of the water a group of men stood staring upward.

Hardly had Bade recognized the figures as those of men when one of the group turned and ran to where a saddled horse stood waiting. He leaped into the saddle and spurred the animal away at a break-neck gallop.

"That ship!" Tarnib cried. "It belongs to the pirates who captured me." His lips thinned in a hard smile. "This, friend Sinbad, is where I even up the score."

CHAPTER IV

TARNIB shouted directions to the roc. It dipped down toward the water.

The men on the beach had leaped

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into the rowboat, and now were trying frantically to reach the ship. The roc glided toward them with the speed of a striking dive bomber. Just above the water it leveled off. Its claws grasped the rowboat, spilling its occupants into the sea. Then, rising a short distance into the air again, the roc turned toward the ship.

Bade clung desperately to the huge feathers upon which he lay. He was dizzy from the breathtaking swoops. This bareback stuff, he told himself, was a lot different from riding in the cabin of a plane, held down by safety straps.

As the roc approached the ship, it released the rowboat, which it had been holding in its claws. The object landed amid a group of pirates on the deck, who had been preparing a defense with crossbows. They were knocked sprawling like tenpins, while those who had been fortunate enough to escape damage scattered in panic, flinging away their weapons.

Claws outstretched, huge wings fluttering, the roc now settled down upon the ship. It caught the vessel at the stern, and its mighty pinions threshed powerfully at the air.

Amid the howls and curses of the frightened pirates, the ship slowly lifted. The roc turned it sidewise with a last tremendous effort, and then the feathered giant's great claws released their hold. The ship fell heavily back into the sea. Within moments it filled with water and began to sink.

His slender features quietly triumphant, Tarnib called orders to the roc. It rose once more into the air, turning toward the city in the distance.

Bade remembered the mounted man and tried to find him. But the other had become lost to view behind hills that rose in tumbled confusion far back from the shore.

Tarnib evidently noticed the direction of Bade's gaze. "What do you seek, friend Sinbad?"

"There was one who rode away on a horse."

Tarnib peered at the hills a moment, then shrugged. "He is well hidden by now, most likely. A search would take time, and I wish to reach Jahlad as quickly as possible."

The youth leaned forward to pat the roc's massive neck. "Yasmina made short work of those pirates, by Allah! A useful pet, eh, friend Sinbad?"

"I wouldn't like to have her as an enemy," Bade said.

Jahlad grew in size and detail. It stood in a great green depression amid encircling hills. At the seaward side was a fine, large harbor in which bright-sailed ships rode quietly at anchor. Beyond the harbor spread the city, its white, tile-roofed buildings cool and inviting in appearance. There were numerous larger structures, exotically domed and minaretted. One in particular caught Bade's attention. It stood at the far side of the city, framed in a picturesque setting of lawns and walled gardens. It certainly looked like a palace, he decided.

His guess proved correct. Tarnib directed their winged mount toward the building, and shortly it glided down to a landing in one of the gardens.

Bade followed stiffly as the youth climbed to the ground. He was relieved that his experience as a passenger of the roc was over.

"Solid earth," he said with a sigh. "My gratitude to Allah."

Tarnib grinned impishly, stretching. He appeared calm and unruffled, as though he had just returned from a quiet walk. "You can have solid earth, friend Sinbad. I want food—and plenty of it. What I have been through has given me an appetite."

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BIRDS chirped and fluttered among the trees at the edges of the garden. Somewhere a fountain splashed musically. The air was cool and laden with the scent of flowers. Sunlight, dimming now with the approach of evening, made bright patterns on the grass where it filtered through intervening foliage.

In the next instant the sound of voices and of numerous approaching feet became audible. Bade saw a group of men appear and come hurrying forward. In the lead was a short, fat man, resplendently dressed, with a huge turban apparently worn to make up for his lack of height. The others were composed of lesser officials and of several armed men who obviously were soldiers.

"Highness!" the man with the turban exclaimed. "Is anything amiss that you should return in this fashion? Where is your ship? What has happened?"

Tarnib explained quietly. He told how pirates had attacked his ship, murdering those of the crew who had not perished in the fight. He himself had been taken prisoner, and had been chained in a cave on a tiny island, with three of the pirates left as guards. Sensing that something had happened to him, Yasmina had appeared during the night, taking the three pirates by surprise and killing them. But she had been unable to rescue Tarnib from the cave, since the opening was too small to permit her to enter. So she had searched for a man who would be intelligent enough to understand what needed to be done, and who would co-operate. She had found Bade and brought him to the island.

Tarnib's familiar grin flashed as he described his revenge in the sinking of the pirate vessel by Yasmina. Finally he gestured.

"That is all, Achmed. There is nothing further to worry about. The rest of you, return to your duties."

Bade followed as Tarnib and the man called Achmed turned toward the palace. Achmed, Bade found upon being introduced, was the palace chamberlain. He had a round, putty-colored face in which his features were set like nuts in dough. His eyes were black and button-like, somehow suggestive of a sly cunning.

"Is El Khad in his laboratory?" Tarnib asked Achmed.

The other shook his huge turban. "He seems to have gone away on one of his trips, your highness."

"Gone away!" Bade said involuntarily. Sudden anxiety rose in him.

"That is not an unusual thing for El Khad to do," Tarnib explained. "He often takes these trips. He goes to the places I described to you, friend Sinbad." The youth returned his attention to Achmed. "But did not El Khad tell you of his plans, or when he intended to return?"

The chamberlain shook his turban again. He looked startledly concerned, as if the possibility of something wrong had only now occurred to him.

"Strange . . ." Tarnib muttered. "That is not like El Khad." Abruptly his slender form grew rigid. "Friend Sinbad, I believe I know now why Yasmina brought you! It was most logical that she should summon El Khad—but he had gone. She went to . . . the other places in an attempt to find him. This, however, it seems she was not able to do. She obtained you in his place, evidently having decided from the ship in which she found you, that you were equal to him in power."

Bade nodded slowly, his unease growing. If something had happened to El Khad, he would be marooned in this world in actual time.

Tarnib had turned back to the cham-

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berlain. "When did you learn that El Khad was gone?"

"It was yesterday, your highness. In the morning. Since El Khad was conducting the affairs of state in your absence, I went to bring him word that a guest had arrived at the palace. Then it was I found that he had gone. Servants told me he had been performing some sort of an experiment the night before."

"Who is this guest you mentioned?"

"Prince Hussein al Meznir, your highness."

"Meznir?" Tarnib's voice was sharp with sudden annoyance. "What does he want? To ask for Najla in marriage as usual?"

"As usual, your highness," Achmed said. He sighed and spread his fat hands.

TARNIB glanced at Bade, frowning. "By Allah, if Meznir were not a prince, I would have him whipped and thrown into a dungeon. He rules the principality bordering Jahlad, and it is no secret that he had designs upon my state. He hopes to obtain control by marrying my sister, Najla. If I were to consent, no doubt he would arrange to have something happen to me. As he may well have arranged the attack upon me by the pirates."

"Not a nice neighbor to have," Bade returned thoughtfully. "Now I understand why you were so anxious to return here."

Tarnib moved his head in a grim nod. "Meznir would long ago have taken Jahlad by force, but he fears El Khad's magic. And well he might, friend Sinbad! As long as El Khad has the talisman, Jahlad is safe."

"Talisman?" Bade echoed questioningly.

"It is . . . well, a sort of instrument. A key to sorcery. It is the talisman which gives El Khad his power. Meznir does not know of it, or you may be certain that he would make efforts to steal it in one way or another."

They had reached the end of the garden, and now they strode into a broad, arched doorway leading into the palace. Beyond was a large, exotically furnished room. They passed through this and into a long hall. Passing servants greeted Tarnib with evident affection, glancing curiously at Bade. The youthful prince seemed to notice this.

"There are those who do not understand about time as I have explained it to you, friend Sinbad. It would be wise not to mention that you have come from another world. Else you would be feared as a sorcerer—or as a demon."

Bade nodded in quick comprehension. He remembered that he was in the early Middle Ages, a time when superstition dominated the lives of almost everyone. Only a very few were as modern in knowledge and outlook as Tarnib.

"I shall say that you have come from a far country," Tarnib added. And then his grin flashed impulsively. "If you wish, I shall say that you are a prince of that country. Sinbad, prince of America! "

Bade smiled and shook his head quietly. "I'm not a prince—just an ordinary man. I couldn't pretend a rank I didn't really have. If I must have a title, let it be that of Sinbad the Voyager. For that is true. I have come a long way to Jahlad."

"A very long way," Tarnib said softly. He rested a hand on Bade's arm. "There is honesty in you . . . and courage. These are qualities that I like. I wish—" The youth moved his slender shoulders in a quick shrug. He grinned crookedly. "But who am I to interfere with the will of Allah? It is written that you must go back."

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Bade said nothing, aware at that moment of an odd perplexity. While Tarnib's eyes had gazed into his, echoing the softness that had been in his voice, he'd had the strange impression that the youth was somehow not what he seemed—that he was another person entirely. Bade could not understand the reason for the feeling. But it was strong enough to leave him disturbed.

Achmed, the chamberlain, had excused himself upon reaching the palace. Now he came hurrying back importantly, a servant following in his wake.

"I am having a room prepared for your stay," he announced, bowing to Bade. "No doubt you will wish to bathe. And . . . ah . . . perhaps change your garments."

"I think that is an excellent idea," Tarnib agreed. "Later, friend Sinbad, I will be pleased to have you join me at food. Perhaps I had better warn you that Meznir will be present."

"I'll be ready for him," Bade said. He followed as the servant led the way through the palace and to a suite of large, luxurious rooms. Other servants were waiting. Self-consciously Bade allowed himself to be scrubbed and dressed. His clothing consisted of a brocaded jacket and full trousers that fitted snugly at the ankles and were held up by a scarf wound about his waist. His feet had been fitted with leather slippers, the toes of which curled upward, and a satin turban with an egret plume had been placed upon his head.

With numerous final adjustments, the servants at last stepped back to survey the result of their work. Bade waited defensively, expecting them to burst out into laughter. But oddly they did not laugh. Their faces seemed—admiring.

A mirror was brought, and Bade was allowed to view himself for his own critical inspection. His hawkish features gazed back at him in wry amusement. He told himself that he probably looked like a fugitive from a masquerade party. Then the amusement faded as the full effect of his appearance struck into him.

He *was* Sinbad. There was no clownish mixture of East and West. For the first time he completely realized that his face had a distinctly Arabian cast.

A short time later one of the servants led him to a large room lighted by numerous hanging oil lamps. In the center of it was a long, low table surrounded by cushions. What seemed an army of servants were hurrying to and fro, their arms laden with steaming dishes. The table already groaned beneath a burden of food.

Bade sniffed hungrily—then checked himself as he noticed Tarnib standing at one side of the room, talking with an air of weary patience to a heavy-set man with saturnine features who could only have been Meznir.

CHAPTER V

TARNIB brightened as he in turn became aware of Bade. He smiled quickly and gestured.

Bade felt Meznir's eyes upon him as he approached. They were deep-set eyes, heavy-lidded and cold. Above them his thick black brows met in a solid line. His nose had a prominent hook, and his mouth was full and sensual. The squareness of his face, with the hard planes of its high cheekbones, was offset by a pointed, short beard. He was elaborately, even flamboyantly, dressed. His bearing was arrogant and self-assured, indicating, unlike Tarnib, that he took his royal title seriously.

Tarnib performed introductions. Meznir *salaamed* stiffly, his glance at Bade hard and searching.

Tarnib said, "I was telling Prince al

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Meznir how you rescued me from the cave, friend Sinbad."

"Yasmina was really the one who rescued you," Bade disclaimed. "I just helped her a little."

"The roc must have brought you from somewhere," Meznir said. His voice was deep, with a growling undertone. It carried at the moment a distinct note of inquiry that implied the demand for an answer.

"Yes," Bade said. He saw Tarnib's faint frown of warning and remembered the other's admonition that it would be wise not to reveal the incredible nature of the place from which he had come.

"You were nearby, perhaps?" Meznir said again.

"Not too far away."

"In a ship, no doubt."

"No. Another island."

"Ah," Meznir said. "And what was your station there, *effendi* Sinbad?"

"I was a digger of holes," Bade said gravely. "Very deep ho[illegible]"

"A curious occupation," Meznir said. His heavy lids drooped. "Allah has indeed been kind to see that you have not fallen into one of them. But your good fortune may not last, *effendi* Sinbad. You must be more careful in the future."

The subtle warning was not lost on Bade. He said quietly, "That is excellent advice. I shall remember it—particularly if your highness happens to be in the neighborhood of my digging."

Meznir drew himself up, his full lips tightening. Tarnib said quickly, "The food is served. Come, let us be seated."

The meal began in strained silence. Bade was aware that Meznir's gaze turned frequently to him while he ate. The man's anger seemed to have faded—or at least to have been filed away for future reference. He looked darkly thoughtful.

Bade knew he had made a serious enemy. Meznir appeared to be a man who held a grudge, as well as one who was determined and cunningly resourceful. He would stop at nothing—not even within the borders of another prince.

Bade decided that Tarnib had excellent reasons for suspecting that Meznir had been responsible for the attack by the pirates. By rescuing the young prince from the cave, Bade realized that he might very well have ruined Meznir's plans. This in a mind like Meznir's would make him an object of hatred and retaliatory schemes of some highly unpleasant sort.

Bade made a mental note to watch his step as long as Meznir was around.

Presently, as if mellowed by the food, Meznir thawed to the extent of initiating an exchange of small talk between Tarnib and himself. Bade he pointedly ignored.

THE conversation touched upon topics that evidently were of deep interest to Meznir. He spoke of wars between other states and detailed choice items of gossip involving neighboring princes or chieftains. At one point he described an expedient he had devised to create a new flow of funds into his treasury—which, he slyly assured Tarnib, was bulging fatly.

Merchants passing through his principality on their way to markets in other states had had their journeys considerably lengthened by the necessity of detouring a deep gorge at a critical point along the route. Meznir had been approached for permission to construct a bridge to span the gorge. This he had given. Later, when the bridge was completed, he had confiscated it under the excuse of military precautions. Then he had begun charging merchants a high toll for the right to pass over it. And to insure that the toll would be

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paid, he had secretly ordered the older route blocked up. This was accomplished by creating a deliberate avalanche at another critical point. To detour this meant that the merchants would have their trip lengthened still further. The bridge was left as the only convenient avenue of traffic.

Meznir chuckled in appreciation of his tactics. Then, obviously recalling another matter connected with his recital, he scowled. "Talk of low breeding! Those merchants actually had the bad manners to form a delegation petitioning me to lower the toll. Well, by Allah, I showed them! I had the whole delegation arrested and worked over by my torturers. You can be certain that the merchants were glad to pay the toll afterward."

Tarnib said nothing. He kept his face lowered, but Bade could see enough of it to know the other looked as sick as he felt himself.

Meznir wiped his lips and leaned back among the cushions with a belch. "Since we are talking in this pleasant manner, Tarnib, I think it would be a good time to bring up a certain subject. It is . . . highly personal. I would prefer to talk to you in private." He glanced meaningly at Bade.

Tarnib said, "I am sure there is nothing you have to say to me which could not be said in front of my friend Sinbad."

Meznir's heavy brows lowered. "This seems a very strange friendship that you should allow it to interfere with serious matters of state."

"Sinbad saved my life," Tarnib said simply.

"Which does not alter the fact that he is a common digger of holes," Meznir grunted. "He is beneath the position which would allow him to overhear matters concerning those of royal blood."

Bade forced himself to remain quiet, though a hot tide of anger mounted within him. Meznir, for all his princely background, was an unmannerly boor and needed a sound beating. Bade did not doubt his ability to administer it. His years around oil camps had brought him into conflict with toughs of all varieties, and he had won more than his share of fights. But as a guest of Tarnib he did not feel at liberty to make worse what was already a difficult situation.

Tarnib was leaning forward, his slender face flushed. He spoke quietly, though evident rage throbbed in his tones. "Meznir, Sinbad is my guest as much as you yourself. Moreover, he is an invited guest, which I think gives him certain privileges. He may not be of royal blood, but his manners show that he is above certain who are. It is my wish that he remain in my presence at all times. If you have anything to say to me which I cannot share with him, then I shall consider it beneath my interest."

Meznir relaxed slowly, his lids drooping. He said softly, "That is strong talk for a young prince who may not be able to support it by force of arms."

"You think not?" Tarnib demanded coolly.

"There is the possibility." Meznir looked detached, almost sleepy, but his lidded gaze had a hard and glittering intentness. "I notice that El Khad is not present in the palace. There seems a strange uncertainty regarding his whereabouts. Can it be that his magic has for once proved too much for him?"

Tarnib shrugged easily. "There is nothing strange about El Khad's absence. He will return soon. I know his habits better than the servants do, so do not let their actions lead you to the wrong conclusions. As for El Khad's magic, Meznir, he has more control over it than you think. For all you

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know, El Khad may be watching what is taking place here right now."

DESPITE Tarnib's confident bearing, Bade realized that Meznir's thrust must have struck home. Bade recalled what Tarnib had said about El Khad's magic forming the basis of Jahlad's resistance to Meznir's imperialistic ambitions. And something *had* happened to El Khad. Meznir only suspected it, and Tarnib's denial might sidetrack him temporarily. But if El Khad's absence continued, Meznir would become certain that the magician was no longer an obstacle. He would attack Jahlad at once, before Tarnib could muster a substitute defense.

A coldness spread through Bade. So many things depended on El Khad's return. Among them was the answer to his problem of finding the exact world in actual time from which he had come. It was important to him—but not all-important. Somehow the security of Jahlad and the personal safety of Tarnib and his sister mattered just as much. Perhaps because his own safety was also involved. But he felt certain there was more to it than that. He knew he liked Tarnib and wanted to help him to the same extent that he disliked Meznir and wanted to see the man's predatory hopes blasted.

During the momentary silence, Meznir appeared to have been thinking over Tarnib's last remark. Now he leaned forward, a conciliatory smile on his too-full lips.

"You must not take me too seriously, Tarnib. In the heat of things one is apt to make remarks that he does not mean."

"I am willing to dismiss the matter," Tarnib said.

Meznir nodded as though pleased, but it was evident that he did not relish having to humble himself. "The subject I wish to discuss with you concerns Najla. I have not yet begun to despair that you might agree to our marriage."

"I have not been disagreeing," Tarnib returned. "It is for Najla to say whether she desires marriage, and to whom."

"But she is just a woman," Meznir protested. "Women have no choice in such matters. It is the custom of the land for the nearest male relative to decide whom a woman shall marry."

Tarnib shrugged. "Women are human beings just as much as men. They have a right to make decisions which affect their life and happiness."

Meznir's lips parted for further argument. Then he seemed to think better of it. He fingered his short beard reflectively.

"Najla knows of my suit," he said at last. "Has she not mentioned her feelings regarding it?"

"She does not seem able to make up her mind."

Meznir swept one muscular hand in a sharp gesture. "A woman's mind is made up for her! You must assert yourself, Tarnib. By Allah, are you not a man and the ruler of Jahlad?"

"There are circumstances that you do not understand," Tarnib explained patiently. "Najla and I are twins. We have been alone for most of our lives. Our mother did not survive us, and our father—may his soul be at peace!—was deeply immersed in affairs of state up to the very hour of his death. Thus Najla and I have always been very close. For this reason I am content to let her decide on the question of marriage. I shall honor her decision."

"I must talk to her, then," Meznir growled. "I am sure she will agree to the idea after I have explained the benefits connected with it. A marriage between Najla and myself would mean a closer union of our states."

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BADE grimaced inwardly at this. He knew the marriage would also mean that Meznir would be in a position to obtain control of Jahlad in the event that something happened to Tarnib. Out of loyalty to Najla, the people might be willing to let him rule. Thus there would be no necessity for war, which would lead to a defeat by El Khad's magic. It became clear to Bade that Meznir's scheme had been devised as a way of getting around El Khad.

In the next moment Bade found himself thinking of Najla. He wondered what she was like. If she resembled Tarnib as much as their relationship as twins seemed to imply, she would be a nice person to know.

Tarnib finally rose from the table. "I must ask you to excuse me for the present," he said to Meznir. "I have been through an unpleasant experience, and am in need of rest."

Meznir rose also, nodding in a preoccupied way. "But Najla? Will you see that a meeting is arranged?"

"I shall speak to her." Gesturing to Bade, Tarnib left the room. He strode unseeingly, his eyes on the floor, and his shoulders bowed. He looked tired and careworn.

As they strode through a long, dim hall, Tarnib stopped suddenly and looked up at Bade. "Perhaps you will think me a child, friend Sinbad. Or one not fitted to shoulder the burdens of state. But I am worried. El Khad's disappearance is creating grave difficulties. If he does not return—and soon—I fear that Jahlad may perish."

"Because of Meznir?" Bade said.

The youth nodded somberly. "Because of Meznir. He is arrogant and boorish—but he is clever, friend Sinbad. Do not let his poor qualities blind you to that fact. He suspects that something has happened to El Khad. He is not certain, but if El Khad does not return soon, he will be certain."

"But there must be something you can do alone," Bade suggested. "Don't you have a fighting force of some kind?"

"There are the harbor police and the palace guard. But they are too few in numbers to serve as a defense against an army. I am afraid, friend Sinbad, that I have placed too much trust in El Khad."

Bade rubbed his jaw, frowning. At last he said, "There seems only one way to stop Meznir, then. And that's to make the man a prisoner while he's still here, in the palace."

Tarnib shook his head with a slight, humorless smile. "Meznir has not overlooked that possibility. On each of his visits, I have been informed that large numbers of heavily armed troops had taken up positions at the border which would permit a swift advance into Jahlad. Undoubtedly, such preparations are even now in effect. To touch Meznir in any way would mean immediate invasion."

Bade sighed hopelessly, and the mood deepened in him when shortly he and Tarnib parted. He went slowly to his room. It was starkly clear that El Khad was his and Tarnib's only hope.

But—suppose El Khad never returned?

CHAPTER VI

MORNING dawned. Bade ate breakfast in his room, dressed, and wandered outside. He breathed deeply of the cool air, and in the splendor of the new day it seemed incredible that the shadow of disaster hovered over his pleasant surroundings.

He followed the garden paths about the palace, until presently, off to one side, he came into sight of a long, low building, which evidently was a stable.

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He thought at once of the mounted man who had been conversing with the pirates on the beach the day before. With purpose now directing his steps, he hurried forward.

A number of men were gathered before the stable, engaged in various tasks. The not unpleasant smell of horses rose on the morning air, and Bade could hear the impatient thudding of hoofs against wooden stalls, interspersed with occasional whickers. He sought out the head groom, a grizzled and wiry oldster, who seemed astonished to find himself the target of Bade's attentions. The man *salaamed* awkwardly and stood blinking in confusion under Bade's glance.

"I am Mustapha Ali, *effendi* . . . at your service. Is there aught I can do? Perhaps the *effendi* desires a horse to ride?"

Bade smiled reassuringly. "I wish to ask a few questions." He glanced at the others, who were listening intently, and motioned for Mustapha Ali to follow him out of earshot.

"Does Prince Meznir have his own horse with him?" he asked, then.

The oldster nodded, interested, though puzzled. "That he does, *effendi.* A fine animal."

"Too good for Prince Meznir, no doubt," Bade suggested with an impulsive grin.

Mustapha Ali studied Bade a moment, then chuckled. "It is my opinion, *effendi,* that the horse ought to be riding Prince Meznir. It is less an animal than his highness."

"Was Meznir riding the horse yesterday? Around late in the afternoon?"

"That he was, *effendi.* He came rushing back in a great hurry, as though an army of jinni were in pursuit."

"I . . . see." Bade thanked the old man and thoughtfully resumed his walk. Meznir had been the man on the horse, then. There was no further doubt that he had plotted to have Tarnib kidnaped by the pirates and done away with.

He heard sudden footsteps behind him, and whirled, a vague alarm tightening his muscles. He relaxed as he saw it was Mustapha Ali.

The old man looked anxious. "*Effendi*—it seems we were spied upon by Meznir's groom. The others saw him sneaking away. When Meznir learns what I said about him, it will go hard with me."

"Don't worry," Bade said. "I intend to see Prince Tarnib about this. He won't let Meznir touch you."

Mustapha Ali was profuse in his thanks, and with a dull anger burning in him, Bade continued on. Damn Meznir, he thought. The man's baleful influence seemed to touch everywhere.

Bade turned his steps back to the palace. In response to his questions, a servant directed him to the audience hall, where it seemed Tarnib was conducting affairs of state.

The chamber was crowded, Bade found. Tarnib was seated in a chair upon a dais, with numerous scribes and palace officials gathered about him. Most of those present—obviously spectators—stood around the sides of the room, while the others were seated on benches, according to their rank and business.

Deciding that this was no time to interrupt with other matters, Bade retired discreetly to a spot near one wall, where he fell to watching the proceedings with interest.

AS THE minutes passed, he was amazed at the number and variety of the matters with which Tarnib dealt. The youth was called upon to settle lawsuits, civil problems, and questions involving taxation or commerce. He made new laws and sat in judgment on criminal cases. His decisions were swift

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and always appropriate. Only occasionally did he confer with his advisers. Sometimes he was grim, but more often his decrees were enlivened by flashes of humor. More than once the audience hall rang with laughter as he gave a Solomonesque twist to some affair that otherwise would have been sordid and depressing. It was evident that the people of Jahlad were well satisfied with their prince.

A small stir at the entrance, near Bade, presently drew his attention. He saw that Meznir had entered. The man's square, dark face wore a preoccupied frown. He watched the proceedings for some moments, his sensuous lips slowly twisting in a grimace of contempt. And then he noticed Bade. His black eyes sharpening and his features tightening bleakly, he stalked forward.

"*Effendi* Sinbad, I have heard that you have been asking certain questions about me. For a mere digger of holes you take a great deal of authority upon yourself."

"When I have good reasons, yes," Bade said pointedly

"A digger of holes does not have reasons. You would be wise indeed, *effendi* Sinbad, not to meddle in affairs which do not concern you."

"I think they do concern me. And I'm sure Tarnib would tell you the same."

"Do not place too great dependence upon Tarnib. His reign may end soon—very soon." Meznir leaned forward slightly, his black glance hard and intent upon Bade. "You have displeased me, *effendi* Sinbad. And the time may not be far distant when I shall hold an accounting with those who have done so. It would be an excellent idea if you were to make haste in returning to the place from which you came."

A moment longer Meznir's eyes held Bade. Then he turned sharply and left the hall, seemingly in a great hurry.

Bade gazed after him, angered—yet impressed. He knew Meznir's threat wasn't an empty one. Momentarily he had the sensation that the jaws of a vise were closing inexorably about him. He could not forget that return to his own world in time was still a virtual impossibility.

When Bade brought his attention back to the audience hall, he found that the meeting was breaking up. Palace guards cleared the chamber, and one by one the officials about Tarnib bowed themselves from his presence. The youth stood up, glancing around. Sighting Bade, he smiled quickly and gestured.

"So much for that, friend Sinbad. Did you find the affairs of state interesting?"

"Very interesting," Bade said. "And instructive. But I have learned other things as well." He told the other of the information he had obtained at the stable, and of the threat Meznir had made a short time before.

Tarnib stared into distance, worrying his lip. At last he made a helpless gesture. "I wish there were some course of action I could take against Meznir, but without El Khad my hands are tied. I can only try to delay the man as long as possible. And I am depending on Najla's help to do this."

"Is she interested in him?" Bade asked before he had time to consider the propriety of the question. He realized that his growing curiosity about Najla would lead him into further slips if he weren't more careful.

"Najla—interested in Meznir?" Tarnib said. "Hardly, friend Sinbad. She dislikes the man exactly as much as I do."

"Then it would seem that she has an unpleasant job ahead of her." Bade rubbed his jaw in sudden indecision. He

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weighed his impulses against his better judgment—and the impulses won. With an effort at being casual he said, "You know, Tarnib, I think I would like to meet Najla."

A SWIFT grin flashed over Tarnib's face. "You would? I'm sure Najla will be pleased to hear that. I had been planning to see her as soon as possible, and I shall mention it. If you present yourself at the pearl garden within the hour, friend Sinbad, you may get your chance."

With the grin still evident at the corners of his lips, the youth hurried from the room. Bade hesitated, feeling vaguely that he had made a fool of himself, then once more strode outside.

He found a secluded spot in one of the gardens and stretched out on the grass. The sky was blue and serene. The air was still cool, fragrant with the scent of flowers. All about him, blending pleasantly, was the musical splashing of fountains and the twittering of birds. Yet he was tense. He could not relax completely.

Exactly why, he wasn't certain. Perhaps it was the shadow of threatening danger Meznir had cast over the palace. Perhaps it was . . . Najla.

But why should he be excited over the thought of meeting her? It might have been mere curiosity. It might have been because she was an unknown quantity, an object of mystery and speculation.

Somehow, though, he knew it wasn't that. He knew she would be very much like Tarnib. And that, of course, was the answer. He liked Tarnib, admired and respected him, in a way he had seldom experienced. Since Najla was Tarnib's female counterpart, he knew he would like her just as well—or more.

Within the hour, Tarnib had said. . . . In the pearl garden. Bade shifted impatiently. Time seemed to be lagging. He wished vaguely for a newspaper.

Something flashed through the air and buried itself in the turf at his side. He sat erect in startled surprise, heard a ripping sound, and discovered that his silken blouse was pinned to the earth with a knife. With a convulsive movement, he pulled the weapon free and jerked to his feet, staring in the direction from which the cast had been made. The branches in a spot amid some bushes several yards away were waving gently—but it might have been due only to the breeze. The garden was still. Bade saw no indication of a human figure.

He looked for a long moment at the knife in his hand, then thrust it slowly into the sash at his waist. It seemed obvious that Meznir was emphasizing the warning he had made.

CHAPTER VII

A GARDENER supplied Bade with directions to the pearl garden. The man seemed hesitant.

"The pearl garden is part of the women's quarters," he explained. "Men are not allowed there, except under certain conditions."

"I'm sure it will be all right," Bade said. "Prince Tarnib told me to go there."

Following the directions, he came to a high wall on the seaward side of the palace. The wall was covered with flowering vines, and shrubs grew thickly along its base. Bade found the narrow flagstone path which had been described to him, and this led to a narrow, iron-bound door in the wall. The door was open.

Slowly Bade stepped through. The garden beyond seemed very large, and it was . . . gorgeous. There was no

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other word to describe the place. It was a riot of exotic colors and scents. Flowers and shrubs grew in masterfully arranged plots and beds. Fairy-like bridges arched over lily-pad covered pools, and in tree-shaded nooks were fountains or benches of marble and alabaster. Nightingales fluttered among the branches of the trees, and as Bade advanced, he saw peacocks flee from his approach.

He continued with growing uncertainty along the path he was following. There seemed no indication that his appearance was expected, and he was uneasy at the thought that he might be intruding. Then, as he rounded an abrupt turn in the path, a number of things happened in jolting succession.

A giant figure with a shining black face loomed without warning before Bade. He darted aside instinctively, tripped, and fell sprawling. And while the thought of possible danger still flamed in his mind, he heard soft, silvery laughter. His head jerked to the sound, and he stared.

A girl was seated on a marble bench at the edge of a small pool. His first confused impression of her was that she was young, slender and lovely. This startled him in no less measure than the realization that she must be Najla.

He started awkwardly to his feet, then felt powerful hands close about him and lift him easily the rest of the way upright. He muttered his thanks at the grinning Nubian, who afterward stepped back with folded arms.

There was a flutter of motion, and Bade found the girl standing before him. Her eyes were blue and long-lashed—and widened in concern. They looked up at him over a veil of sheer silk that covered the lower half of her face, the usual concession to Arabian custom.

"Are you hurt?" she asked, and her soft voice, like her blue eyes, had a haunting familiarity.

"I'm all right," Bade said. He gestured at the Nubian, who now seemed making an effort to be properly aloof and impassive. "I was looking for Najla, and I wasn't expecting anyone like your big friend, there."

"Ibrahim didn't mean to frighten you," the girl said. Then, mistily visible beneath the veil, her red lips parted in a flashing smile. "I am Najla. And you, of course, are Sinbad, the Voyager. Tarnib has told me of you. He said you wished to meet me."

Bade grinned self-consciously. "I was curious, I guess."

"And I as well," Najla said with astonishing frankness. She gestured toward the bench. "Would it please you to be seated?"

Bade sat down, careful not to trip again. His legs still seemed strangely awkward. He heard the girl speak to the huge Nubian.

"You may leave us, Ibrahim."

The giant bowed and strode out of sight, and Najla turned to the bench. Bade watched her intently as she seated herself gracefully beside him. She was so much like Tarnib that it was difficult to determine exactly where the one left off and the other began. Najla was boyish in the same way that there was a feminine quality about the slender handsomeness of Tarnib.

Her light brown hair was long and soft, shining with warm golden glints in the light. It was held back from temples and forehead by a jeweled tiara. Her clear skin had something of Tarnib's golden tan, though it was lighter in hue. She wore a sleeveless, brocaded jacket over a blouse of rose-colored silk, and a long striped skirt that rustled stiffly with her movements. The curled-up toes of small scarlet slippers were visible at the hem.

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SHE became aware of Bade's glance and smiled. She looked away casually, plucking a flower from a nearby shrub and running the tip of a finger over the petals.

"It is not usual to entertain a man in this place and in this fashion," she said. "There are special circumstances, of course. But Tarnib and I have never bothered ourselves overmuch with conventions. We have found it makes life simpler."

"That's true, isn't it?" Bade said. "One can lose a lot of enjoyment in following the rules too closely."

"Tarnib told me you came from another world in time," the girl went on. "I understand about that, you know. The customs must be very different in your world. You do not seem to be a prince, yet you might very well have been one. You do not seem awed by royalty."

"There are no princes in my country," Bade explained. "All men are equal—or at least that is the idea of our form of government."

"It seems strange—yet there is an appeal to it. Tell me about your world. How do the people live? What are the cities like?"

He began describing what she wanted to know, haltingly at first, for the difference in language was a handicap. There were no terms for many of the ideas he wished to get across. However, he found he could do almost as well by the use of metaphors and allusions, and as he grew more accustomed in these, the word-picture he drew became vivid and realistic enough.

He talked for a long time, softly, sometimes smiling, sometimes serious, often gesticulating in his absorption with the task. Najla listened with her small chin cupped in her palm, her blue eyes intent on his face.

When he was finished she said, "It sounds like a wonderful and magic place, this world of yours. Too good, almost, to be true. I wish that it were possible for me to visit it."

"And I wish it were possible for me to take you there," Bade said. "But I don't know yet whether I can go back myself."

"I understand. Tarnib told me of that, too."

"Did he also tell you of Meznir?"

"Yes. . . . He has asked me to be pleasant to Prince Meznir, so as to delay him in his plans until El Khad returns. It will be difficult, but I shall do my best."

"I'm sorry you have to be involved in this," Bade said abruptly. "If only there were something I could do . . . something brilliant and clever, like the things done by heroes in adventure tales. I suppose I could, if I had some of the weapons and machines used in my world. But I don't have them. And without the tools and materials, without the knowledge and skills, it is impossible to make them. I can only do things as they are done here—and it seems I am no more clever than anyone else."

"It is always thus in real life," Najla said softly.

They talked a while longer, following the philosophical note Bade had struck. The girl possessed a depth of understanding that surprised and delighted him. She was quick to grasp unfamiliar details, and she could continue along any line of thought, regardless of how complex it became.

The conversation was almost insidiously pleasant. Bade did not know how much longer it might have gone on, if Ibrahim had not put in a sudden appearance.

"One approaches, my princess," he said in a muted rumble. With that the huge Nubian took up an impassive

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stand beside the bench, great arms crossed over his massive chest.

THE arrival proved to be Meznir. When he appeared around the sharp turn in the path, he was muttering to himself in evident ill-humor. At sight of Najla, Bade, and the Nubian, he stopped short. He masked his surprise with a smooth bow in the direction of the girl.

"I was promised an audience with you at the hour just passed, princess. I expected it to be conducted with proper formalities, but since none were made, I decided to seek you out."

"I am sorry," Najla said quickly. "It was a grave oversight."

Meznir bowed again, gesturing magnanimously. Then he directed a searching glance at Bade, and for a brief instant naked hate and fury surged into his face.

"You seem to be everywhere, *effendi* Sinbad."

Bade shrugged and rose from the bench. "It would seem that way."

"Everywhere that a common digger of holes has no right to go," Meznir added.

"That," Bade returned, "is a matter of opinion." He pulled the knife casually from his sash and held it out. "Did you lose this, Prince Meznir?"

The other's heavy lids drooped slightly. "Of course not."

"But perhaps you know who did."

"Why should I?"

"It was the way I found the knife," Bade said. His eyes gazed steadily into Meznir's for a moment. Then he turned to Najla. "I have enjoyed meeting you very much, princess."

She smiled and nodded. She said nothing, but the warmth of her glance was all the answer Bade needed. He bowed, ignoring Meznir, and strode away toward the door in the garden wall and walked out.

Returning to the palace, he encountered Achmed, the chamberlain. Tarnib, he learned, was occupied with household matters for the present, having left orders that Achmed was to attend to Bade's needs. Food was the only necessity Bade could think of at the moment.

He spoke to the chamberlain while he ate. Achmed mentioned having eaten a short time before, but he made a full meal of morsels that he picked from the table as he talked. With his fat body and ridiculous turban, Achmed appeared simple and harmless enough, yet again Bade noticed a quality of slyness about the man, a sort of lurking guile in his button-like, black eyes. Bade became certain that there was more to the chamberlain than appeared on the surface.

When presently Bade prepared to leave the table, Achmed lifted a detaining hand. He glanced about him, then leaned forward with a conspiratorial air.

"*Effendi* Sinbad, I have been speaking to you with a purpose. There is no longer any doubt in my mind that you are a completely trustworthy and capable person. I need your help in a certain matter."

"What do you mean?" Bade asked.

"I cannot explain here. All I can say is that it concerns El Khad."

"You know what happened to him?"

"Yes."

"Then why haven't you told—"

"I will explain it all later, *effendi* Sinbad. First I must have your promise of help."

"All right. What do you want me to do?"

The chamberlain described a spot in the city, which he said was easy to find. Bade was to go there in an hour and wait. Achmed would meet him and

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lead the way to a place where a full explanation would be made.

Bade agreed quickly. He spent the time waiting in his room, questions tumbling in confusion through his mind. His analysis of Achmed's character gave him doubts about the meeting, but if the man knew anything about El Khad, any risks were worth taking.

Finally Bade left the palace and found his way out of the grounds. He located the spot Achmed had designated, a large public fountain, and settled down to wait.

Not long afterward, a figure muffled in a cloak appeared beside him. It was Achmed. As a further disguise, he had replaced his usual ornate style of turban with one smaller and less conspicuous.

"What now?" Bade questioned.

"We will go to a place where we can talk in complete privacy," Achmed said. "You have only to follow me."

Their steps led toward the bustling waterfront district. Here the streets were narrower than elsewhere and crowded with people. Porters with laden donkeys, laborers, seamen, merchants, and shopping townfolk mingled in a jostling stream. A babble of voices and a wailing of musical instruments rose on the air from innumerable small shops and inns.

They reached an alley near the docks. Achmed stopped at the door of a long wooden building that seemed to be a warehouse. Gesturing to Bade, he strode inside. Bade followed, misgivings surging once more within him. The interior was unlighted, seeming all the more dark after the comparative brilliance outside.

"Here he is!" Achmed said.

That was the only warning Bade received. In the next instant figures leaped at him out of the gloom, and he was knocked roughly to the floor.

CHAPTER VIII

BEFORE Bade could overcome his shock, it was too late for struggle. His assailants held him helpless.

A light was struck, and Bade saw rough, bearded faces looming over him. The owners appeared to be typical dock rats, recruited for the purpose. One produced a rope, and Bade was swiftly and thoroughly bound.

Then, as his captors stepped back, two figures appeared in the circle of illumination around Bade. He stared, a cold wind sweeping through him. One of the men was Achmed, the other—Meznir.

"I might have known you would be back of this," Bade said softly.

Meznir's full lips curved in a wolfish smile. His face, with its pointed beard and hooked nose, looked Satanic in the lamplight. Like Achmed, he had donned a less noticeable costume for the occasion.

"Unfortunately, the knowledge comes too late to do you any good," Meznir returned. "You are securely in my power, *effendi* Sinbad. And what that means, you shall quickly learn."

Almost leisurely, Meznir strode forward. Before Bade could twist aside, he drew back his foot and sent a vicious kick into Bade's ribs.

Pain and nausea exploded in Bade. Through a haze, he saw the foot coming toward him again. He was too numbed to make an effort to avoid it. There was another burst of pain—another, and another. The haze thickened around him.

Presently Meznir desisted, breathing hard. Through the dull agony throbbing within him, Bade took a desperate grip on consciousness. When his mind seemed to steady, he opened his eyes and looked at Achmed.

"You let that devil put you up to

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this? I suspected you had a scheming nature, but I didn't think you would go so far as to become a traitor to your prince."

The chamberlain lifted his plump shoulders in a shrug. He tried to muster a display of bravado, but succeeded only in looking uneasily defiant.

"What about El Khad?" Bade went on. "Was that just a trick to get me here?"

"Naturally," Achmed said. "I know nothing about El Khad."

Meznir laughed grimly. "That is a matter which we will now take up."

Achmed stiffened in swift apprehension. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean, my over-fed traitor, that I have planned this little affair so as to accomplish two things at one time. As you well know, it was arranged between us that you should steal El Khad's talisman in return for a fortune in gold and gems and the position as vizier of Jahlad. As a major step in that direction, I was to remove Tarnib, so that he would be unable to interfere. I acted while he was away on one of his seafaring jaunts, following information with which you supplied me. I had hoped, incidentally, that Tarnib's loss, which could easily be explained as having been due to a storm, would make Najla more amenable to the idea of marriage."

Meznir shrugged and directed a scowling glance at Bade. "That end of the plan would have succeeded had it not been for this upstart and that thrice-cursed pet roc of Tarnib's. It was a great blow to see the roc appear out of the sky with Tarnib as I talked to my men on the beach. They had just finished assuring me that they had been successful in capturing Tarnib."

"The pirates were your men?" Bade put in.

"My men, disguised as pirates," Meznir grunted. "Just as this group, here, is disguised as dock scum." He swung back to Achmed. "When I arrived in Jahlad, you told me that El Khad had departed for some mysterious other place, and that you had been unable to steal the talisman. However, it soon began to appear that there was something extremely strange about El Khad's going. I am now convinced that you did manage to steal the talisman after all, and further, that you are responsible for El Khad's vanishment. If you were willing to betray Tarnib, you would have no scruples about betraying me also. And possession of the talisman would be more important than the reward I offered you."

"No!" Achmed said hastily. "No—you are wrong. It is as I have told you."

"We shall see about that." Meznir motioned to his men.

ACHMED was gripped from both sides, squealing in panic. As Meznir barked swift orders, a gag was forced into the chamberlain's mouth, his hands were tied behind his back, and then he was lowered to the floor. While part of Meznir's men held him helpless, the others removed his slippers and began to busy themselves with the oil lamp.

Shortly the odor of burning flesh rose on the air. Achmed threshed and jerked in agony. Choked cries came from behind his gag.

Bade looked away, sick and angry. He seized the interval to test the ropes binding him, and found they had been knotted too carefully to permit loosening.

Achmed's struggles grew weaker. Once he signaled his willingness to talk, but it was only to insist that he did not have the talisman. His gag was replaced and the torture resumed.

At last the chamberlain nodded in

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response to Meznir's demands that he tell the truth. When the gag was removed this time, Achmed admitted having been successful in obtaining the talisman. He had used the magic instrument to maroon El Khad in another world, then had hidden it. Questioned by Meznir, he revealed that the talisman was located in a secret compartment in his room at the palace. He had intended using it after Meznir left Jahlad. He had not been certain of his ability to manipulate the talisman's powers correctly, and with Meznir and Tarnib both present, he had felt that he would have been taking too big a risk.

Achmed's confession was made haltingly, forced out between gasps and moans of pain. His plump face, which had never held a healthy color, was deathly pale and beaded with sweat. Meznir was beginning to question him about El Khad, when abruptly he stiffened with a sharp intake of breath. He held the grotesque pose a moment, body rigid, eyes squeezed shut, his lips drawn back in a grimace. Then, slowly, he went limp.

Meznir leaned forward with a puzzled expression. He grasped Achmed's shoulder and shook it impatiently, but this produced no signs of awareness. Finally Meznir placed a hand over the other's heart. When he straightened up again, his saturnine features were twisted in disgust.

"Dead," he said. He shrugged. "I intended to kill him anyway. His usefulness to me had ended."

Meznir returned his attention to Bade. He looked darkly exultant. "Triumph is within my grasp, *effendi* Sinbad! Achmed has told me where to find the talisman. That obstacle has been lifted from my path. Within a matter of hours, Jahlad will be in my hands!"

Bade fought to keep his despair from showing in his face. There seemed little doubt that Meznir was right. Achmed's confession, even though wrung from him by torture, had fitted in too neatly with known facts. And the luckless chamberlain's description of the talisman's hiding place had been too concise and definite to be a fabrication made on the spur of the moment.

El Khad was already out of the way as a source of danger. With the talisman in his possession, Meznir would have nothing further to fear. He had only to give the word, and his troops, poised even now at the border, would come sweeping irresistibly into Jahlad.

Tarnib would be made a prisoner, of course. And most probably Meznir would use the youth's life as a tool to force Najla into marriage. Bade thought of that with a sudden sickness. He knew his meeting with Najla had not left him unaffected. More, he knew he had been half in love with her even before that.

As for himself, he couldn't overlook the knowledge that a return to his own period in time was now forever impossible. The loss of El Khad and the talisman precluded that. But even so he had no assurance of continued existence. He was certain that Meznir intended to kill him in some unpleasant fashion.

¶N THE next moment, as though having sensed the thought, Meznir brought up the subject of Bade's fate.

"For the immediate present, *effendi* Sinbad, there remains only the matter of your disposal. You have insulted, humiliated, and defied me on a number of occasions. I would enjoy killing you with my own hands, but a quick death is more than you deserve. I intend to make arrangements for a method which will be drawn out over a period of months, and which will make you suffer every second. You will think of me

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many times before you finally die."

Meznir watched Bade for a moment, smiling thinly. Then he turned to his men and issued curt orders. All but three followed him as he strode from the building. These settled themselves on the floor around Bade, having been left as guards.

Anxiety gnawing within him, Bade wondered what Meznir planned to do. It wasn't until some time later that he learned.

The men who had left with Meznir came trooping back. They spoke briefly to the guards, and all joined in making certain swift preparations.

Bade was lifted roughly and placed on a broad strip of heavy cloth, which was then wrapped about him. The muffling folds galvanized him into desperate action. He squirmed and kicked violently in an effort to fight free. But it proved futile, even as he had known deep within him it would be. Hands gripped and tightened about him. Something crashed into his head.

He did not entirely lose consciousness. Vaguely he was aware of being lifted and carried. He did not know how far he was borne. It did not seem distant.

Then he felt himself lowered heavily to a hard surface. His head was clearing. Through the folds of cloth he heard the mutter of voices.

"You understand what you are to do?"

"Aye. He is to be chained carefully and not to be allowed to escape. He is to be driven hard. When he can no longer work, he is to be thrown into the sea."

"See to it—or it will go hard with you."

"Aye, that I will. And the money which was promised me?"

"Here."

After a pause Bade heard footsteps leaving. An order was barked by the man into whose custody he had been left. He felt the cloth being removed from about him, and suddenly he discovered where he was—on a ship. It was dark, now. Stars were visible in the sky between intervening sails and rigging. A number of dim shapes were clustered about him, and one began sawing at his ropes with a knife. Freed of his bonds, he was pulled erect and shoved forward along a narrow wooden walk. There was a trench-like space on both sides, within which were visible the wraith-like figures of men.

Even then Bade didn't quite understand until he was pushed from the walk and onto a wooden bench in one of the spaces. Heavy cold chains were locked about his ankles. His eyes fastened to the handle of a long oar looming in front of him.

He knew, then. He knew that he had become a galley slave, doomed to row constantly under the merciless bite of a whip, until his strength finally left him. And then—a grave in the sea.

CHAPTER IX

THE ship left Jahlad a short time later. A burly man appeared on the catwalk and began to lash at the chained figures in the trenches on either side of him with a whip.

"Awake, you scum! Awake!" he shouted between cuts. "Pull oars, or by Allah I'll have the skin off the backs of every one of you!"

A shape stirred on the bench beside Bade. For the first time he realized that he had a companion rower.

"Grip the oar, friend," the other whispered, in a strangely accented voice. "I'll row until you learn the method of it. But in the meantime it must appear that you are working, or Yusuf the overseer will flay you with his

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whip. He gives no mercy."

Bade muttered his thanks and placed his hands on the oar. A moment later the overseer came forward, still shouting and laying around him with the lash. Bade felt the sting of it across his shoulders. Then, as it descended again and again, he realized that he had been deliberately singled out for punishment. Fury surging within him, he started erect, hands reaching blindly for his tormentor.

In the next instant he felt himself pulled back down on the bench as his oar companion caught at him from the other side. He heard the other whisper urgently.

"Nay! Fight will avail you nothing. You will need your strength."

The overseer was cursing. "Defiance, by Allah! Well, I'll take it out of you. Breaking in is what you need—and you're going to get it. You'll learn who is master here!"

Bade felt the whip burn repeatedly across his back. He gripped the oar handle spasmodically, eyes squeezed shut against the agony that flamed through his body. In a far corner of his mind a diamond-hard, diamond-bright core of determination grew. Yusuf was going to pay for this, he promised himself. And Meznir as well. One way or another, impossible as it seemed, he would accomplish it.

Presently Yusuf desisted to devote his attention to the other rowers. Bade sagged against the oar, his back and shoulders aflame with pain. His companion was keeping the oar in motion, and as he gradually recovered to an awareness of his surroundings and realized this, he felt a deep gratitude for the other's help. He gripped the handle more tightly and straightened. He swayed with the movements of the oar for a time, accustoming himself to the rhythm, then began to aid in rowing. The activity helped to ease the pain of his hurts. Once, glancing at his companion, he saw the man nod and grin in a flash of white teeth.

"I am in your debt, it seems," Bade said.

"Think nothing of it. We share a common misfortune. Perhaps you can lighten my load a little in time to come . . . My name is Chundar Singh. Yours?"

"Sinbad. I'm glad to know you, Chundar. Been here long?"

"Two months, as nearly as I can reckon it. I was captured in a war with an enemy province and then sold as a slave."

"Two months . . ." Bade muttered.

"Cease that chattering, you two!" Yusuf's voice shouted above him. "Pull your oar!" And to emphasize his commands, he swung his whip viciously.

A short time later Yusuf was called forward by a group of crewmen. They were gathered about a dim shape on the deck.

"What is that?" Bade asked Chundar.

"Don't you know? It is one who was carried aboard with you. He seems to be dead."

"He is," Bade affirmed. He had remembered Achmed.

He watched the group. One of the men held a lantern, and in its light Bade saw that the others were engaged in stripping the chamberlain's corpse. They commented over each article as it was removed, arguing among themselves for possession. At last a couple of the men lifted the body and carried it to the ship's side, dropping it over the rail. Bade heard a heavy splash as Achmed's remains hit the water. He decided that Meznir had had the unfortunate chamberlain taken aboard the ship for exactly that purpose.

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YUSUF returned along the catwalk, and once more Bade devoted his attention fully to rowing. The rhythm of the oar was sinking into him. He found he could follow it without concentrating. His mind was free to follow its own thoughts, and in the sea-scented darkness, with the creak of plied oars rising over the murmur of water against the ship's hull, he thought of Najla.

Morning dawned. The rowers were allowed to rest in shifts, and Bade and Chundar Singh were among those presently enjoying a respite. Bade was napping against the oar, when he became aware that someone was shaking his shoulder roughly. He lifted his head and found himself looking into Yusuf's bearded, brutal face.

"Captain Farkuz wants a word with you. Step lively now. He doesn't like to be kept waiting."

The chains were unlocked from about Bade's ankles, and he was pulled to his feet. He stifled a groan. His muscles were stiff and sore, making movement an agony. And blisters had formed and broken on the palms of his hands.

Captain Farkuz was seated in his cabin, a dingy, sour-smelling room. He was a small, bony man with a rat-like, narrow face, clad in garments that were wrinkled and stained. His cold eyes ran over Bade in calculating appraisal.

"This is a strange affair," he began, and Bade recognized his voice as that of the man who had spoken when he first arrived on the ship. "It seems you were badly wanted out of the way. I was paid to take you aboard as a galley slave, when I would have been glad to do so for nothing. Most of the time I have to pay to get rowers. I was told that political reasons were at the bottom of it. Is that true?"

Bade nodded. "Prince Meznir wanted me removed because of his designs on Jahlad. Princess Najla may also have been part of his motives. Undoubtedly he feared my presence at the palace would spoil his hopes of marrying her."

Farkuz rose half out of his chair. His mouth was open, his eyes wide. "Prince!" he muttered. "Princess . . . palace!" He gulped and sat down again. "Just who are you?"

"Why, I am Sinbad, Prince of America. Weren't you told?"

Farkuz shook his bony head numbly. Then he looked puzzled. "America? I've never heard of it."

"It is a very distant state," Bade said.

Farkuz moistened his lips. His eyes had narrowed, and the calculating look had crept back into them. "You look like a prince, all right . . . No doubt there would be a large reward for me if I returned you to this state of yours."

"A very large reward," Bade agreed. "However, returning me to America is not exactly necessary. Jahlad is much closer, and Prince Tarnib would pay you just as well. He and I have become close friends."

Farkuz fingered his long nose. "But there is the possibility that I would be punished by Prince Tarnib for having taken you aboard as a galley slave."

"You didn't know," Bade said. "How can you be blamed?"

"But the other—Prince Meznir?"

"My return could be made secretly. Meznir wouldn't learn of it until it was too late."

Farkuz continued to rub his nose, frowning. "I must think this over," he said finally. "In the meantime—" He turned to Yusuf, who had been an interested listener throughout, and directed that the overseer take Bade to a spare cabin.

Alone in the narrow, plain room to which Yusuf led him, Bade fell to pacing the floor in excitement. He had

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gauged Farkuz' avaricious nature exactly, and the man had fallen for his ruse. The essence of his scheme was not so much to be taken back to Jahlad as to be freed of his chains as a slave rower. There were difficulties about the former arrangement, what with Meznir already in probable control of the state, that would make Farkuz suspicious. The only way to guarantee his return to Jahlad was thus to take over the ship. And without the obstacle of being chained, he planned to do precisely that.

TOWARD noon Bade was taken back to Farkuz' cabin, where he was invited to join the captain at food. Farkuz appeared still hesitant, but Bade played his role as a prince for all it was worth, at the same time minimizing the dangers which Farkuz feared would arise in returning him to Jahlad. The man seemed reassured. But he refused to put the ship about immediately. He had a cargo to deliver at Basra, and only after that would he set a course back to Jahlad. Bade gave in, cursing inwardly at thought of the increased distance.

He went through his pretense again at the evening meal. Farkuz seemed delighted at the opportunity to share his table with a prince, though it became evident to Bade that the man's reasons had a more practical significance. For as they ate Farkuz slyly questioned Bade about the financial condition of Jahlad and America. Bade realized suddenly that the other was thinking of more than a mere reward. In his avariciousness he appeared to be considering nothing less than the idea of holding Bade for ransom.

Bade's dislike for the rodent-faced captain grew. Farkuz was as wholly unscrupulous and evil as he was physically unclean. No act of treachery, where it involved possible profits, was beneath his consideration. Nor did Bade overlook the fact that Farkuz was the real force behind Yusuf's inhuman and sadistic supervision of the slave rowers.

Bade spent the remainder of the day in his cabin. When night at last lay deep and still over the ship, he roused into grim action.

He went directly to the cabin window, having ascertained long before that the door was kept securely locked. The window was barely large enough to permit him to squeeze through. He accomplished this easily enough and pulled himself up on deck. He searched the gloom carefully, listening. Only one or two of the crew seemed to be on duty at this part of the ship. Reassured, he made his way slowly over to Farkuz' cabin, keeping to the shadows and taking advantage of various obstructions.

He reached the door without discovery. Wiping his moist palms on his sash, he tried the latch. It moved under his fingers, and the door swung open. He stepped inside quickly. The interior of the cabin was dark, but he had been careful to memorize the details of it on his previous visits. He knew that the ring of keys he wanted hung on a nail above the table where Farkuz kept his instruments and charts.

He listened for a moment to the sound of the man's thin snores. Farkuz seemed safely asleep. Bade felt his way over to the table, groped against the wall above it, and found the keys. In the next instant the ship gave a sudden roll, and the keys dropped to the table with a clatter.

A vast silence followed. There was an abrupt rustle of motion from the cot where Farkuz lay.

"What's that?" his voice demanded. "Who's there?"

"Yusuf, master," Bade said, pitching his voice to the burly overseer's deep tones. He moved toward the cot.

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THERE was a momentary silence from the captain. Then his voice sounded again, heavy with doubt.

"Yusuf? But it does not sound—"

Bade's gripping fingers choked off the rest. He kept squeezing until Farkuz went limp.

In motion again, Bade found a cloak and draped it over his shoulders, using one corner of it to wrap and muffle the ring of keys. Then he left the cabin. He strode boldly toward the galley section, stooping so as to conceal his height.

Yusuf was on guard at the head of the catwalk. He had a trick of being able to nap while on duty. Any slightest unusual sound, or deviation in rythm of the oars, would rouse him.

Bade was able to approach the overseer closely before the creaking of a board gave him away. For an instant Yusuf gazed at the oncoming, cloaked figure without recognition. Then, his eyes flaring wide, he started to his feet.

Bade lunged the remaining distance. His fist came upward in a long arc, thudding solidly against the other's bearded jaw. Yusuf staggered back, arms flailing at the air. He tottered momentarily at the edge of the catwalk, then fell sprawling among the wildly incredulous and staring rowers.

Instantly there was a whirl of violent movement, of which Yusuf was the focus. Eager hands closed about him, muffling his cries, stilling his struggles. There was a terrible delight, a deadly thoroughness, in the attention he received. The rowers had lived for nothing but this moment. In the scant seconds of it they were making up for long months of suffering and abuse.

Bade did not linger to witness what was already a foregone conclusion. With the keys he began unlocking the chains of the men nearest him, working his way toward the other end of the ship.

He was half finished when a crewman on duty finally became aware of the activity at the galley section. The man released a shout of alarm, and a short time later the others of the crew came boiling to the deck.

The liberated rowers met them and held them off while Bade completed his task. And when Bade at last was free to join the battle raging about him, he found his help was no longer necessary.

Later, with a grinning Chundar Singh beside him, Bade altered the course of the ship back to Jahlad. Though freed of their chains, the rowers were back at their oars. The places of those too weak to continue had been filled by former members of the crew. The oars were plied lustily, amid much singing.

CHAPTER X

BADE rested in the shadow of the palace wall, gazing back toward the moonlit city. In the sadness that rose within him he forgot his exhaustion. There no longer was any doubt in his mind that Meznir had conquered Jahlad. The city had become gloomily silent and still. There were numerous burned buildings and other signs of damage. And several times, in making his way toward the palace, Bade had had to hide from patrolling troops. Once he had been sighted and pursued for some distance.

He was glad that he'd had the ship approach Jahlad by night and well down the coast from the harbor, for beyond doubt Meznir also had patrol craft on duty. He thought briefly of his long trek from the place where he had swum ashore to the spot where he now rested. Chundar Singh and numerous others of the liberated gally slaves had wanted to accompany him, but he had felt that he would accomplish his mission best alone.

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Questions nagged in Bade's mind. Had Meznir located the talisman, as conditions in Jahlad seemed to show? What had happened to Najla and Tarnib? Was there some way he could help them?

He stirred in sudden impatience and glanced at the wall beside him. Vines covered it, reaching completely to the top, and they appeared strong enough to support his weight.

He straightened, rubbed his palms against his hips, and began to climb. Reaching the top of the wall, he peered over, listening. Fountains splashed and leaves rustled in the garden beyond. Weird patterns of silver light and sable shadow lay over the moon-bathed lawns. There were guards, Bade was certain, but none in his immediate vicinity.

He lowered himself carefully into the garden, listened again, then began moving toward his next objective. This was the garden where he had met Najla. He felt certain that he would find the girl there. Tarnib, the greatest possible source of danger to Meznir, would most probably be imprisoned in some place as unknown as it was inaccessible.

Moments later Bade crouched to earth in the shadows of a bush as a soldier strolled past, slapping a long, curve-bladed sword against his leg. In the next quarter of an hour he repeated the maneuver again and again as he continued toward his destination. He knew luck was with him in his close escapes from discovery. It didn't seem possible that it could last.

Finally he saw the wall of the pearl garden looming across a stretch of moonlit lawn. He circled the area, knowing the grim need to keep constantly in the shadows. As he went around a dark clump of bushes, he came without warning upon a stone path. The sole of one of his tattered slippers caught on the edge, and he stumbled. Slight though it was, the sound did not go unnoticed. There was a sharp inhalation from a near point along the path, then the clinking of metal. Footsteps followed, approaching hastily, yet with unmistakable caution.

Bade dodged back behind the bushes, cursing silently. He realized that he had given himself away to one of the guards. It meant he would have to do something about the man. His search might attract the attention of others.

BADE waited until the oncoming footsteps sounded very near, then moved abruptly from behind the bushes, straightening from his crouch. He took the guard completely by surprise. Before the man could swing up his sword, Bade rammed his fist into the pale oval of the other's face. The guard's own forward momentum helped make the blow effective. Bade's arm seemed to go numb to the shoulder, and in the next instant the guard sprawled limply against him, unconscious. Bade caught the man, staggering to keep his balance, then carried him out of sight behind the shrubbery.

A sudden idea made Bade pause as he turned away to resume his trip to the pearl garden. He went back to the fallen guard and began quickly to strip the man of his uniform and weapons. Then he removed his own salt-stiffened and dusty garments, replacing them with those of the guard. As an afterthought, he used his sash to bind and gag his victim.

Breathless from his efforts, but grinning in his newly appropriated and slightly too small finery, Bade now strode boldly forward. He found the door that led into the pearl garden, but it was locked. Another climb was indicated, and Bade didn't hesitate. He found a conveniently vine-covered spot along the wall and went over.

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He dropped lightly to the ground on the other side, pausing to listen again. The silence held. He found the path that led from the door and into the garden and strode along it, toward the pale bulk of the palace wing, ahead.

He was close, when a giant figure loomed with paralyzing abruptness out of the shadows to one side of the path. A huge hand closed about his throat. The blade of a great sword glittered in the moonlight as it was raised high.

"Dog of Meznir!" a deep voice growled. "I thought it was decreed that the soldiery were not to trespass in this part of the palace."

It was Ibrahim, Bade realized, Najla's giant Nubian guard. In the next instant the other recognized Bade also. The whites of his eyes showed in a stare of utter disbelief. He released his hold and stepped back.

"*Effendi* Sinbad! It was thought that you had vanished—that you might be dead. How does it happen that you are here, in the uniform of Meznir's troops?"

Bade explained briefly. "I must see Najla," he finished. "You must tell her that I am here. Perhaps there is something I can do while my presence remains undiscovered."

Ibrahim ducked his head in a quick bow. "I will tell her at once, *effendi*. She will be delighted to know that you are back. Najla has not been the same since learning that you were gone." With a grin, he turned and vanished in the darkness.

Bade thought of the Nubian's last words as he waited. He felt a glow of deep pleasure in the discovery that Najla had been concerned about him. He realized this was because she had been in his mind almost continuously since their meeting.

She was an unusual girl, he told himself. There were qualities about her that he couldn't define. He only knew that she drew him in a way he had never before experienced.

Minutes later he heard the sound of quick footfalls. A slender figure materialized out of the surrounding darkness and hurried toward him.

"Sinbad!" She caught his hand. "It is really you! I had given up hope that you might return."

He grinned down at her. "I did the same a few times. But did it matter so much to you?"

She met his eyes gravely. "Very much." Then she turned away, pulling him toward a stone bench. A shaft of moonlight struck across the spot where she sat, and in its silver radiance her loveliness took on an ethereal quality. She wore a cloak over a long white gown, and her shining hair hung in awry curls about her shoulders.

"Tell me what happened, Sinbad. Did Meznir do something to you? And can you tell me why Achmed has also gone?"

BADE repeated what he had already told Ibrahim, though in greater detail. He described Achmed's treachery and the chamberlain's death as a result of the torture at the hands of Meznir's men.

Najla's slender face was saddened. "I had been trying to decide in what incredible fashion Meznir was able to obtain the talisman. The matter is now clear. And the mystery of El Khad's disappearance, also. I had never suspected that Achmed might turn traitor."

"He most probably would never have done so, if Meznir hadn't suggested it," Bade said. He questioned her about Meznir's conquest of Jahlad.

"It happened very rapidly," she said. "But of course, he had his troops ready all the time. The battle was over be-

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fore we fully knew what was going on."

"And Tarnib? What has been done with him?"

"Tarnib cannot be found. Or at least that is what Meznir claims."

Bade stared at her, dismay filling him. Had Meznir killed Tarnib? He had been confident that the man would keep Tarnib prisoner, using the youth's life as a bargaining point against Najla. But perhaps, Bade decided, Tarnib had somehow forced Meznir's hand in a fatal direction.

"I'm sorry," Bade told the girl, who was looking steadily down at her folded hands. "But it may be possible that Tarnib is still alive somewhere. He may have escaped Meznir."

She said nothing.

"The talisman . . ." Bade muttered after an interval of silence. "What is it like? Have you seen it?"

Najla moved her small head in a nod. "It is a very large, round jewel that constantly changes color. It is enclosed with an intricate framework of gold, to which a gold chain is attached. Meznir wears it about his neck always, obviously fearing its loss. And he is slowly learning to use it. I have heard that he spends much time in studying the manuscripts and volumes El Khad left behind. Before much longer he will be too powerful ever to be subdued."

Bade began questioning the girl carefully about Meznir's location in the palace. She answered mechanically. And then, evidently realizing the significance of his quiz, she caught anxiously at his arm.

"Sinbad — what is in your mind? Surely you cannot be planning to attack Meznir. He is surrounded by his guards. You will be caught."

"It is a risk I have to take. As the situation is now, there's no hope for us. If I can take the talisman away from Meznir, his conquest will crumble from under him like a thing of sand."

She looked into his determined eyes, and her face twisted. Almost as though in weariness, she leaned toward him, placing her head on his shoulder. Her slender body was shaking with quiet sobs. He held her tightly until she grew calm, then stood up.

"I must hurry. There is not much time left."

She rose, too, standing slim and straight before him. Her eyes shone. "Whatever happens, Sinbad, we shall share the same fate. I would not want it otherwise . . . Now come with me. I shall show you a way into the palace. There are secret passages of which Meznir knows nothing."

A short time later Bade strode down a long, luxurious hall, toward a pair of richly carven and inlaid doors at its end. Meznir slept behind them, he knew. And the lines of his hawkish face tightened bleakly at the knowledge. Hatred of Meznir surged within him, overcoming for the moment the cold tension that gripped his mind.

AS HE drew nearer, he saw that two soldiers were stationed before the doors. He congratulated himself for his forethought in donning the uniform of the guard he had overcome outside the palace. The dim illumination of the hall was also a help. But he wasn't certain he would be able to pass these two particular soldiers as easily as he had those along his route here from the spot where Najla had left him.

He told himself he had to pass. Everything depended on it. Never again would conditions shape themselves into such an opportunity.

The two soldiers straightened to attention as Bade came up to them. They were staring in bewilderment.

Bade was hunched over as though in

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pain, breathing like a man who has expended great physical effort. He held an end of his turban over one side of his face, and the twisted expression of the visible portion left little doubt that he nursed some serious wound.

The soldiers had long since noted the fact of Bade's familiar uniform. Their observations went no further than that. Whatever suspicions they might have had were submerged in the perplexity and vague alarm evident on their features.

"I must see Prince Meznir at once," Bade gasped out. "It is urgent!"

"What has happened?" one of the guards demanded curiously.

"A magician has slipped into the palace," Bade said. "I tried to capture him outside, but he used his fiendish arts on me. Prince Meznir must be warned!"

As Bade had guessed, the threat of magic was something the guards understood. It seemed to leave no hesitation in their minds that the matter was serious enough to warrant the immediate knowledge of their prince.

The guard who had spoken whirled to his companion, cautioning him to remain on watch. Then he gestured to Bade and led the way through the doors. Bade followed into a dim-lit sitting room, waiting as the guard left to awaken Meznir.

Bade remained hunched over, the strip of turban still pressed to his face. His pulses drummed in mounting tension. Flame-like in his mind was the knowledge that the next several seconds were crucial. His plan must not fail, for never again would he have another chance.

He heard a door open, heard footsteps approach him from across the room. The footsteps stopped before him. He could see the toes of handsome bedroom slippers under a magnificent silk robe. A familiar voice spoke harshly.

"What is this nonsense about magicians? Speak up, man, or you will regret this disturbance!"

Bade raised his head. He looked into Meznir's face. He saw the recognition there, the shock, the swift hatred—and the surging fear. At the same time he saw the great jewel, enclosed within an intricate gold framework, hanging by a gold chain from Meznir's neck. And he saw there was nobody close enough to Meznir and himself to interfere with what he intended. The setup was perfect.

While surprise still gripped Meznir, Bade acted. He leaped forward, and his hand shot out toward the gold chain.

He had hardly moved, when he felt himself gripped about the body and lifted high in the air. It seemed that giant hands had seized hold of him. And in the next instant, through the dismay flaring within him, he realized that this was exactly what had happened. But the hands, as well as the creature to which they belonged were quite invisible.

CHAPTER XI

RECOVERING his self-possession, Meznir smiled in grim delight. He touched the jewel about his neck and spoke a few swift words in what was obviously an alien tongue.

Bade felt himself lowered to the floor, though the hands gripping his body did not relax their hold. His struggles were futile. The unseen, huge fingers about him contained an enormous strength.

Meznir strolled closer, surveying Bade from lidded eyes. "Your disguise was clever, *effendi* Sinbad—but not clever enough, it seems. It was quite

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a surprise to see you again. I had felt certain you were completely out of the way. However, it appears that I have made a mistake in the method by which I attempted to dispose of you. It is a mistake I shall not repeat."

Bade said nothing. The knowledge of Meznir's triumph, underscored by the man's arrogant tones, brought a sudden, blinding rage that rose over his despair. He took swift advantage of the grip about his body, using it as a support to lash out at Meznir with both legs. But quick as he was, the invisible, giant hands jerked him back out of reach.

Meznir chuckled in mockery. "My little pet makes an effective guard, eh? I conjured it into being through use of the talisman and the formulae El Khad left behind. It is an other-plane creature, which for some reason is not visible in our world. But no doubt you are quite uninterested in these details. What will interest you is that I intend to see that you are punished for your attempt to harm me a moment ago."

Once again Meznir touched the jewel about his neck, voicing alien words. Abruptly the huge fingers tightened around Bade, squeezing like the jaws of a vise. Unbearable agony rose within him, and only through a tremendous effort of will did he keep himself from shrieking. He did not want to give Meznir that much added satisfaction.

His mind darkened—but he was not permitted to reach the haven of unconsciousness. Meznir spoke again, and the grip loosened. The man watched intently, lips pressed against his teeth in a wolfishly cruel smile. When Bade showed signs of returning awareness, he spoke another command.

The hands tightened once more, and Bade locked his teeth against the torment. His head throbbed with the mounting internal pressure until it seemed that his skull would split. The welcome darkness, shot with red flames of pain, began to gather within him again.

But again it was denied. The hands relaxed. Relaxed—and tightened. Over and over. The process occupied only a matter of minutes, but to Bade it seemed an eternity. And then the black tide which had been mounting within him swept over his mind in a sudden rush.

The sting of repeated slaps brought him back to consciousness. He opened his eyes. Through a haze, he saw Meznir nod in satisfaction and step back, rubbing the palm of one hand against his robe.

"I could have had you killed very easily, *effendi* Sinbad, but I have a use for you. Until you have served your purpose, you shall live." Meznir smiled thinly. "It will interest you to know that this purpose concerns Najla. She has refused to consider marriage, and if I must force her into it, I prefer to do so in a way that will make her beg for the opportunity. Unfortunately, Tarnib is not available for the plan I have in mind, having somehow escaped me. But you, *effendi* Sinbad, will serve quite as well as a substitute. To judge from her anxious questions over your whereabouts, she regards you with considerable favor. It is a situation you both are going to regret. I will leave you to ponder that for the time being."

Meznir turned away, issuing curt orders, and shortly a group of additional guards appeared. The invisible hands turned Bade over to them. Chains were fastened about him, and then he was led through the silent palace and into the long-unused dungeon section below. He was pushed roughly into a lightless, musty cell. The heavy door thudded shut, and he was alone with his thoughts in the darkness. They

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were not pleasant. He lowered his bruised and aching body to the cold floor and tried not to think.

THE long, sick hours dragged tortuously past. Napping fitfully, Bade heard the sound of footsteps in the corridor outside. Voices muttered briefly. Then the door opened and two uniformed men entered the cell, jerking Bade to his feet.

With a guard on either side of him and two others bringing up the rear, he was led back up into the palace. He realized presently that his destination was the audience hall, and a sharp wonder rose within him. Just what sort of a scheme did Meznir have in mind?

The audience hall was well filled, Bade found upon being shoved inside. Meznir occupied the chair of state on the dais, officials and guards clustered about him. He was listening to some sort of petition when he became aware of Bade's arrival. Alertness came into his square, dark face, and his sensuous lips twisted into a faintly jeering smile. He turned his gaudily turbaned head to glance at a spot to one side of the dais. Najla stood there, her widened eyes fixed on Bade. Behind her was Ibrahim, huge and impassive, arms crossed over his mighty chest.

As Bade was led forward, Najla abruptly darted around the figures intervening and ran to him. She caught his bound arms, her blue eyes searching his face in anguished concern. She spoke swiftly, her voice soft and urgent.

"Sinbad—what has been done to you? I was told that you had been captured. A part of me seemed to perish."

"I'm all right," Bade said. "Don't—" He tried to go on, but the words seemed to catch in his throat. He clenched his imprisoned hands in the intensity of his desire to touch her, even if briefly. And despite their stark reality, his emotions abruptly struck him as strange . . . strange to have known this slender girl for so short a time, yet to feel that he had known her always.

Najla's fingers tightened. "Your fate shall be mine as I promised, Sinbad—but . . . but I wish we had gone away together while we had the chance. Yasmina could have taken us—"

"Yasmina!" Bade said, a desperate hope flaring within him. "Where is she?"

"Searching for El Khad, I think." Najla's voice quickened still more under the impetus of the sound and activity which was beginning to come from the direction of the dais. Meznir was on his feet, snarling furious commands. "I have been hoping that Yasmina would not return for the present. I feared that Meznir would destroy her."

Bade's forlorn hope died. Dully, he turned his attention to the group of soldiers now hurrying forward behind Najla. They grasped the girl with polite firmness and began to direct her back to her former position near the dais. Ibrahim released a deep growl, anger contorting the lines of his black face. He started into motion, sweeping aside the figures before him as though they were no more substantial than shadow.

The soldiers about Najla swung to the defensive. A moment later they were joined by part of Bade's own group, while others began hastening toward the scene from various portions of the chamber.

Swords glittered, crossbows were readied and aimed. The situation thundered to a crisis that could end only in Ibrahim's death. Yet there was something magnificently implacable about the giant Nubian which indicated that he would sow widespread destruction before he fell.

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Najla spoke softly. She stepped forward, and her slender hand touched Ibrahim's heavily muscled forearm. He quieted in an instant. Then she led him back to the place they had occupied near the dais. The tension in the room dissolved like some tangible thing.

Meznir gazed coldly at the girl. "Princess Najla, I have consented to allow this servant of yours to remain free only to please you. But if he ever again threatens my men, I shall see that he is promptly killed. As for yourself, I hope you will remember your position in the changed circumstances here."

She met his eyes with equal coldness. "My position is no more than you think it is, Prince Meznir. And what you think is not important to me."

"It may be that you will soon feel otherwise," Meznir answered grimly. Then he turned from the girl, motioned peremptorily at Bade's guards, and resumed his seat.

BADE was prodded into motion and led to an isolated spot against one wall of the chamber, where stood a group of dejected looking men, all chained and under heavy guard. He was unceremoniously shoved among them, and except where the vigilance of the guards was concerned, ignored for the time being.

Affairs within the audience hall were resumed. As Bade watched, it swiftly became clear to him that Meznir was a typical despot. He was short-tempered and intolerant with subordinates. In dealing with persons who had sought interviews with him over legal or commercial matters, he was rude and openly contemptuous. He imposed heavy taxes and made harsh laws, and the penalties for even the lightest crimes were needlessly severe.

Bade noted that the room was pervaded by an undercurrent of dread and uneasy tension. The pleasant, lively atmosphere which had marked Tarnib's reign was strikingly absent.

Meznir's heavy-handed tactics, Bade suddenly realized, boded ill for the group of men around him. Their chains indicated that they were accused of serious crimes, which made it certain that their fate was to be a bleak one. Bade didn't overlook the fact that his having been placed among them meant he was to share that fate. And just what it was, he learned a short time later.

With other matters evidently out of the way, Meznir directed his attention to the group of chained prisoners, gesturing toward them as he spoke briefly to the officials about him. Quick preparations were made, while the tension in the hall mounted.

A powerfully built man in a black hood appeared. He was stripped to the waist and carried a huge sword over one shoulder. Behind him came several men, who apparently were assistants. They bore with them a variety of objects, which they arranged in a cleared space near the center of the floor.

First a large square of thick cloth was spread. Upon this was placed a heavy block of wood, the surface of which was covered with dark stains. A number of woven baskets were ranged to one side of the block. Then the assistants stepped back, while the hooded man took up a stand beside the block, leaning on his great sword.

The significance of the tableau was starkly clear to Bade. Through the despairing emptiness that filled him, he was aware that the men around him were shifting and muttering in fear. And somehow, despite everything, he felt a nagging perplexity. The audience hall was hardly an appropriate place for a mass execution. He felt certain that Meznir had some sort of a scheme in

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mind—that Najla, because of her presence, was involved.

A TRUMPET sounded, shattering the oppressive silence that had fallen over the chamber. Meznir rose, fondling the intricate gold framework covering the huge jewel that hung about his neck. He glanced around the chamber, then brought his eyes to rest on the group of chained men. As if to further emphasize the attention he was drawing to them, he lifted a solemnly pointing hand.

"Yonder prisoners are each proven criminals. Some have attempted to obstruct my rule by circulating plans of rebellion, or by inciting the townfolk to open mutiny. Some have gone so far as to take part in cowardly attacks upon my troops on night patrol. Others have refused to pay the taxes levied against them, or have disobeyed the new laws. One in particular"—and Meznir's gaze hardened on Bade—"has actually been rash enough to make an attempt upon my life.

"I therefore condemn each and every one of these men to death. They shall be executed here and at once. I intend that their fate shall serve as a warning to the people of Jahlad that my authority is not to be denied or overcome. . . . Let the execution proceed." Gesturing at the guards, Meznir resumed his seat.

The first of the prisoners was pulled from the group and led, kicking and struggling, toward the wooden block. He was forced into a kneeling position and held down, while a woven basket was placed in front of him. The hooded executioner hefted his great sword and placed himself in position with deliberate, slow movements, as if enjoying the drama of the moment and anxious to prolong it. Then, measuring distances carefully, he raised the great blade high, paused for an instant, and brought it down in a flashing arc. There was a heavy, thudding sound, followed by a lighter one as the victim's severed head dropped into the basket.

Bade watched numbly while the remaining prisoners followed in quick succession. He had a feeling of remoteness, detachment. He knew his own death would take place before much longer, and the certainty of the knowledge seemed to deaden his emotions.

Once he glanced at Najla. She was holding her hands before her eyes, her slender form trembling. He did not try to catch her attention. It would only make parting more difficult for both of them.

Through it all, Meznir sat leaning forward in his chair, still toying with the talisman. His black eyes were glittering, his full lips bared in a ghoulish smile.

And then Bade felt the hands of the guards close about him. He straightened his shoulders and strode forward without hesitation, determined that Meznir should not have the satisfaction of seeing him struggle or cringe in fear.

He saw the wooden block appear before him, its top and sides covered with blood. He kneeled, not waiting to be forced. He placed his head at the proper angle and waited.

He felt the labored pumping of his heart. He tried to keep count of the beats in an effort to escape his thoughts. But he was still aware of the heavy, taut silence of the room around him. He heard the executioner take up his position, and knew, within instants, that the huge sword would come sweeping down.

CHAPTER XII

A SHARP cry tore the straining fabric of stillness. It was followed by the sound of running feet.

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Bade looked up startledly. He saw Najla before him, her slender features pale and dilated with horror. She had thrown herself in front of the hooded executioner, preventing the descent of his blade.

In another instant she whirled to Meznir. "You can't do this! You can't! I ask mercy for Sinbad. Surely the crime of which you accuse him is less greater than the crime of which I am able to accuse you—the very crime which led him into his action."

Meznir rose leisurely to his feet, eyes lidded. "Must I remind you that I am in power here, Princess Najla? It is for me to decide which are crimes and which are not. The man you seek to protect made an attempt upon my life. That is all I intend to take into consideration."

"Have you no understanding of the dignity and honor expected of a prince?" Najla demanded. "Do you refuse even to consider the princely qualities of justice and mercy?"

"I condemned this man to death," Meznir grunted. "I intend to see that the sentence is carried out."

"Very well. But I will permit you to carry it out only on one condition—that my head be placed beside Sinbad's."

"Suppose I refuse, Princess Najla? I have only to speak to my troops to keep you from making such a noble gesture."

"Then I will join Sinbad at a later time," the girl answered quietly. Determination glinted in her eyes. "You cannot have me watched at all hours of the day and night. Eventually there will be an unguarded moment when I shall be able to keep my pledge."

Meznir studied her, stroking his short beard. He looked almost sleepy. "I have little doubt that you would keep your word, Princess Najla. Since I would regret your death as much as I desire Sinbad's, it would seem that you have presented me with a dilemma. An alternative of some sort seems necessary. Therefore, I will suggest the only one that can be permitted under the circumstances.

"As you well know, I have been seeking your agreement in the matter of marriage. If you now consent, I will allow Sinbad to live. You will have that satisfaction. However, I must impose the condition that he be exiled to another plane of existence. Do you consent?"

Najla glanced at Bade, distress evident in every line of her face. He met her eyes with a sudden deepening of misery, knowing how difficult was the decision she had to make. Whether she accepted or refused, their separation would result. And he realized that his death could hardly be more difficult for Najla to bear than a distasteful marriage to Meznir.

He wanted to tell her to refuse, but he knew he couldn't do that. It would be an admission of defeat. Death was a futile means of escape. In life there was always the possibility of a later triumph.

Najla seemed to reach that conclusion also. She straightened purposefully, meeting Meznir's waiting gaze. "I consent," she said.

MEZNIR'S square face lighted in exultation, and abruptly Bade realized that the man had cunningly arranged events to force Najla into her decision. It explained the incongruously staged mass execution, and the reason for Najla's being present to witness it. And it explained the use for Bade of which Meznir had hinted. This had been to serve, in lieu of the strangely missing Tarnib, as a means of bringing pressure upon Najla.

Meznir said abruptly, "Then it is understood, Princess Najla, that you are to marry me. This marriage is to take

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place as quickly as can be arranged. It is further understood that *effendi* Sinbad is to be exiled to another plane of existence instead of being executed. I decree that this matter be carried out at once."

Without waiting for the girl's response, Meznir issued swift orders. Bade's chains were removed, and then, as Meznir issued further orders, those about him withdrew. Najla moved back with despairing reluctance, urged into motion by guards. Bade met her tear-bright eyes in a last glance of farewell, and despite the turmoil within him, he tried to smile in reassurance. Then he turned expectantly to Meznir, assuming a calmness he did not feel.

The other held the talisman in his hands, gazing down at it in scowling concentration. And watching, Bade was startled to see the room blur around him, become hazy and indistinct, as though he saw it through a gathering mist. At the same time he became aware of a sound that was somehow not a sound, for it was something he sensed rather than heard. It seemed to be a voice, reciting a strange formula, and with a shock he realized it held Meznir's hatefully familiar tones.

The oddly soundless voice grew sharper, clearer. It rose to a crescendo —and in the next instant, while Bade still peered in tense wonderment through the gathering mist, the floor seemed to drop from beneath his feet. The distorted outlines of the audience hall dissolved, and all Jahlad as well, down to the very time-world of which it was a part. Bade had the sensation of falling . . . falling endlessly, through a featureless grayness that was bitterly familiar.

And within him he felt a soundless chuckling, mocking, triumphant. He recognized Meznir's tones again. Now he realized that he was receiving the other's thoughts in some weird way—apparently transmitted to him via the mysterious power of the talisman.

"Farewell, *effendi* Sinbad! May you find your new plane of existence pleasant. From El Khad's notes, I deliberately chose a formula which would result in your being sent to a completely inhospitable world. You were foolish to hope that you could escape my vengeance!"

The chuckle sounded again . . . and faded. Bade's mind was left to its own sick, cold thoughts.

Bade continued falling through the grayness, though he realized that this wasn't quite true. Actually he was only in motion. He seemed to fall, because this was a sensation familiar to him in conditions where was swift movement without means of reference.

Again he noticed that the grayness was somehow imbued with life, throbbing, flowing, as though the intangible fabric of it vibrated to the beat of countless thoughts. And he found, by concentrating, that he could perceive vague shapes and scenes in the grayness—not with his senses, but with his mind. As he moved, he was aware of an odd and confusing mixture of impressions, of awesome interstellar vastnesses in which swam planets and suns, of tremendous, sky-high cities, of oceans, deserts, and towering mountain ranges. Sometimes they seemed very near, as though he were in the midst of them; often they appeared enormously distant. Once his perceptions touched an object in the sentient fog that seemed curiously different—and familiar. But it vanished too rapidly for more than a mere hint of recognition.

PRESENTLY he found that his motion was slowing, that the grayness

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was fading. A scene was forming blurrily around him . . . clearing, taking on reality. And then he was sprawling against ice-cold rock. He caught himself, recovered his balance, and peered dazedly about him.

Discoveries, each dismaying and bleak, began to register upon his mind. The first was that it was cold in this place, bitterly, numbingly cold. And dark. The sky was a purple-black, strewn and dotted with remote pinpoints of light. He could recognize none of the constellations. In another moment, as his lungs began laboring for breath, he realized that the air here was perilously thin. The effort to keep his lungs supplied would soon exhaust him.

And then, as he shifted, he grew aware that his weight was much greater here. Movement would draw heavily upon his strength—and this in turn would mean increased breathing. He would have to remain motionless as much as possible to conserve his energies . . . but he couldn't do that. Even now the terrible cold was eating into him. He would have to move about to keep warm. But he couldn't—

The full extent of his dilemma burst upon him. There seemed no way out. Meznir in his treachery had planned well. He had exiled Bade—to unpleasant and certain death. But what filled him with rage was the thought that Najla had bargained herself away to save him. Her sacrifice, he knew now, had been futile.

Gasping, shivering, Bade forced his thoughts away from unavailing recriminations and regrets. He studied his surroundings more closely. The need of shelter became vivid in his mind, and fuel of some sort for warmth. He had to make an effort to keep alive.

He saw that he was situated high on a precipitous, rocky slope that seemed to lead endlessly down into a shadow-enshrouded valley. Reaching the valley, he knew, in the thin air and greater gravity of this unknown world, would be a tortuously difficult process. He might very well collapse of exhaustion along the way—if a misstep didn't send him plunging to his death in the rocky depths. But it was a risk he had to take.

He began working his way laboriously down the slope, inching around fissures or steep ridges, lowering himself from rock to rock. He felt his way along carefully, eyes straining at the gloom. Vivid in his thoughts was the knowledge that an error in judgment would be fatal.

Very soon he was forced to stop and rest. He leaned against a shelf-like outcropping, breathing hard, each breath searing his lungs like fire. His muscles ached from his efforts in the greater gravity. His hands were numb and stiff from constant contact with freezingly cold stone.

When he felt the chill reach into him again, he forced himself to resume the descent. But the lack of sufficient air and the drain upon his strength took swift toll. His pauses became more frequent, and finally, sprawling in utter despair upon a broad ledge, he realized he could no longer go on. He pillowed his head wearily on one outflung arm, shivering, sobbing in his efforts to breathe.

The cold closed around him like a hand of ice. The cold sent insidious tendrils through him, numbing where it touched. The numbness spread. A dreamy langour filled his mind, almost like sleep. He was tired, he told himself. It would be good to rest—even if it meant the final oblivion of death.

As though from far away, he heard a sound. It was a sound he seemed to have heard somewhere before, and the very familiarity of it, added to the won-

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der that there could possibly be a sound in this desolate place, struck fire in his dimming mind.

With a tremendous effort, he sat up. He saw a giant bird, monstrous and unreal in the dusk, settling to the ledge beside him.

CHAPTER XIII

IT WAS Yasmina. He stared at her incredulously, convinced that he was suffering a delusion. But it was a strangely persistent delusion. The roc did not vanish. It remained there, on the ledge, cocking its huge head at him and fluttering its wings in excitement.

Then, as the bird reached down to nudge him with its beak, his last doubts evaporated. Perplexity followed. How had Yasmina traced him here?

Abruptly he recalled the tantalizingly familiar shape he had seen in the grayness. It had been Yasmina, of course. And she had evidently been returning from a fruitless search for El Khad. Their paths had crossed. But Yasmina had recognized Bade and had utilized her weird abilities to come to his rescue.

Unsuspected reserves of strength and warmth flowed into Bade. Yasmina's presence meant that he could return to Jahlad. Somehow he would find a way to reach Najla. And somehow he would find a way to strike at Meznir. The situation wasn't as completely hopeless as he had feared.

Yasmina nudged him with her beak again, and in the next instant he understood. The roc wanted him to mount to its back. It seemed to dislike this cold, almost airless, and barren world as much as he did.

Bade pulled himself to his feet. Grasping the feathers along one great wing and digging in with his toes, he reached the tall column of the roc's neck. He flattened himself at its base, taking a firm handhold on the feathers beneath him.

Yasmina rose, poised a moment at the brink of the ledge, then leaped out into the shadowed, steep declivity below. She fell rapidly in the greater gravity, but her mighty wings began threshing at the air, checking her descent into a long glide downward. More and more rapidly the vast pinions beat, and then slowly but steadily the roc began to rise.

Its speed increased. Pinnacles and peaks flashed past, showing as fantastic black outlines against the purple-black sky. The mountains fell away, became lost in the shadowed vistas below. Above the dark vault spread limitlessly, glittering with the far-flung splendor of its alien stars.

Faster . . . always faster. Bade clung desperately to the feathers under him, his senses reeling under the terrific impetus of the roc's flight. A part of his mind retained a crystal-bright clarity, and it was through this that he realized the secret of Yasmina's speed. For as she moved, she emitted the vibration that took her through the barrier between co-existing planes . . . through and into that grayness between them, which was a dimension common to all, a dimension of such properties that limited and inadequate human senses, in their inability to register them, brought only a sensation of grayness. In that dimension were no restrictions. Physical movement was capable of a speed as infinite as the speed of thought. And that was, in fact, the secret. For thought accomplished what muscles only strained to do. Thus, as the vibration took Yasmina over the borderline between any particular plane and the all-pervading dimension beyond, her speed increased as the restrictions of that plane decreased.

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KEEPING a fingernail grip on consciousness, Bade saw that the star-gemmed darkness was beginning to dissolve, and at the same time, to lighten. The grayness appeared, like a luminous, slowly thickening fog. Then it spread everywhere, inchoate and without limit.

Bade's mind cleared and sharpened. He realized that Yasmina's destination evidently was Jahlad. Somehow he had to prevent the roc from landing at the palace. For that would be the equivalent of leaping from the frying pan into the fire. Meznir would be warned of the appearance of Bade and the giant bird. And aided by the powers of the talisman, he would act swiftly to destroy any possibility of a fresh attack.

But Bade knew as well that it would accomplish little if any good to have Yasmina land elsewhere. It meant he would have to overcome the obstacle of distance in any steps he took against Meznir. Even if he did get into the palace without being discovered, there remained the greatest obstacle of all—Meznir's possession of the talisman.

Bade shook his head hopelessly. There was nothing he could do while Meznir retained that miraculous, uncanny instrument.

He thought with regret of that afternoon when, under torture, Achmed had revealed the talisman's hiding place. If he had only been able to escape then and there, he could have reached the talisman before Meznir and thus prevented the present situation from having come about.

In another instant Bade stiffened as a memory burst like a signal flare in his mind. He could still do precisely that!

It was quite simple. He had remembered Yasmina's ability to travel in time—to move ahead or back, that is, among the various co-existing planes in which forward motion produced the illusion of time. He therefore had only to direct the roc back to the afternoon when Achmed had been forced to divulge his secret. Jahlad then had not been conquered as yet. He would be able to land at the palace without opposition.

But how to direct Yasmina to where he wanted to go? How to make her understand?

"Easily," a silent and curiously strange voice seemed to whisper. "I am aware of your wishes."

Bade jerked in shocked surprise. There had been identity in that voice . . . that *thought*. Yasmina's identity. Incredibly, impossibly, the roc knew what was going on in his mind. Equally startling was the fact that the creature should be able to answer him.

Then he realized it was all quite logical. He had already sensed that the grayness surrounding him was somehow a medium of mind. It was a condition in which only the mind had ultimate reality. Thought was as natural a means of communication here as speech would have been under other circumstances.

Bade began concentrating intently. Swiftly he went over his plan, enlarging upon the details so that Yasmina would clearly understand what needed to be done. Her grasp of the problem proved astonishingly thorough. Bade learned, in fact, that Yasmina's degree of intelligence closely approached the human level. Hers had been the highest form of life in the plane of existence from which she had come. In assuming from her bird-like shape that she was little more than an animal monstrosity, Bade now realized that he had made a serious error.

Yasmina's thoughts grew purposeful—questing. Bade became aware that she was using her mind to *peer* through the grayness, as he had previously discovered could be done. He followed

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suit, and once again he had a confused impression of worlds and alien landscapes, sometimes near, sometimes tremendously distant.

And then his perceptions touched and fixed upon a familiar scene. Almost at the same time he learned that Yasmina had discovered it also. The scene was that of the palace at Jahlad. He seemed to see it at a distance—and from an impossible angle. It was as though he viewed all sides of it at once, yet was able to look at it from above as well.

AS HIS and the roc's attentions centered upon the palace, it seemed abruptly to leap toward them, like the image in a telescope when the magnification is sharply increased. The strange angle of view was no longer apparent, but there was another oddity. Instead of one palace, there seemed a long series of them, merging one into the other and stretching away into the distance in both directions. The phenomenon resembled the repeated images on a strip of motion picture film—except that Bade was *in* the film at the same time.

Yasmina began questing backward and forward along the series. As she did so, Bade noticed that the human beings visible also presented a long-drawn-out double-exposure effect. He found he could easily follow their routes from one part of the palace to the other, and he suddenly realized what he had only sensed from Yasmina's preoccupied thoughts—that she was searching for the routes taken by Achmed, Meznir, and himself on the afternoon Meznir had obtained the talisman.

The roc found what she was seeking. Bade detected the satisfaction in her thoughts, while at the same time he saw the repeated, merging figures of Achmed, Meznir, and himself extending away from the palace. There was no returning extension in this part of the series.

Yasmina began moving downward. The gray mist that hung over the scene began to thin. And then, abruptly, all the curious extensions of objects were gone. Bade found himself in one of the scenes of the previous palace series, all that was now visible with his senses limited to a three-dimensional point of view.

He had a confused feeling as his outlook shifted. The overpowering reality of his surroundings made it seem that the events leading up to this moment had been only a delusion.

The afternoon sun was bright and warm. A breeze touched Bade's face, and he drew its fragrance in deeply. As the roc descended toward one of the gardens near the palace, he heard the splashing of fountains and the chirping of birds.

In another moment Yasmina glided to a landing on the grassy turf, and Bade slipped down from her back. While the huge bird settled down to wait, Bade strode into the palace. He was certain that his appearance would arouse no suspicions. There was no reason for anyone in the palace to suspect that anything unusual was afoot.

He encountered a servant in one of the halls and casually asked the way to Achmed's suite of rooms. He explained that he wished to see the chamberlain about a certain matter. The directions were given without hesitation. As he had guessed, Achmed's departure had not been noticed.

The door to the suite opened easily under Bade's hand. He slipped inside. A quick search showed that no servants were present at the moment. Without hesitating now, Bade went directly to the chest in Achmed's sleeping chamber which the unfortunate chamberlain had described as the hiding place of the

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talisman. He located the secret compartment in the bottom drawer—and then the huge jewel, with its gold framework and chain was in his hands. He thrust it into his sash and left the room.

Nobody tried to stop him as he strode from the palace. No shouts rose in his wake.

Yasmina was where he had left her. Her eyes glittered as he approached, and her great head bobbed in excitement.

He mounted quickly to her back. She rose erect and began running along the turf, flapping her wings with increasing rapidity as she moved. Then she was airborne. She circled for altitude, her vast pinions beating powerfully at the air.

Higher and higher, she rose. The palace below seemed to shrink into itself. The surrounding landscape flattened and spread.

Faster, now . . . and faster. The thresh of giant wings in ever-mounting tempo, the exulting, eager surge of mighty muscles. And then—the grayness.

As Bade's mind steadied, he became aware of a whisper of thought from the roc.

"We go forward?"

"Yes," he said. And then dismay struck into him. Forward—to where?

For the first time he realized that he had, in taking the talisman, created a new plane of probability. In that plane Meznir did not gain possession of the talisman, and hence a different set of conditions had resulted. Finding the magical jewel gone, Meznir undoubtedly would have reached the obvious conclusion that someone had beaten him to it. He would have feared to attack Jahlad until he knew who that person was. And since it was extremely unlikely that he would ever find out, Jahlad would remain safe.

In that new plane of probability, further, Bade would still have escaped his predicament as a slave rower. Thus there seemed nothing of real and immediate importance that he could accomplish.

Where his help *was* badly needed was in the plane where Meznir had obtained the talisman and conquered Jahlad. But Bade realized that his possession of a duplicate jewel had created a paradoxical situation, which might very well exclude him from that plane.

CHAPTER XIV

HE THOUGHT of the talisman and wondered if somehow it might not furnish him with the answer to his uncertainty. Removing the instrument from his sash, he peered hopefully into its depths. It glowed with a light of its own. And amid the shifting rainbow hues of its interior vague shapes seemed to move. Bade squinted intently at them in the effort to bring them into focus.

Abruptly he found himself peering through and beyond the jewel with the eerie impression that he gazed through a great window . . . through and into the black void of some space between worlds. Distant pinpoints of light blazed against the ebon backdrop. As Bade stared at them, he saw a number of slender, pointed shapes flash into view. They seemed for all the world like submarines, but as he watched them a moment longer, he realized what they were—space ships. He had seen futuristic depictions of them in the time-world he had left.

Awe gripped him. He knew he might very well be looking at a scene from a future phase of that world.

He must have peered too intently—for in the next instant the grayness was gone, and he and Yasmina were in the

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star-spattered void, in the very midst of the vessels of space.

Stunned awareness came to him of what must have happened. He already knew that the talisman was a sort of catalyst, acting upon the power of mind. And only mind had ultimate reality. He and Yasmina were in essence little more than three-dimensional images of what they considered themselves to be. With the aid of the talisman, he had projected those images into another plane, in much the same fashion that the two-dimensional images of a moving picture are projected upon a screen.

But Bade found that he had somehow projected the roc and himself in the wrong perspective, for they were huge in proportion to the space ships. At the moment, however, that was a minor detail. He was reminded by a number of painful physical sensations that he and Yasmina were in a frigid vacuum. It was imperative that they leave at once. Added to this, the space ships were beginning to conduct themselves in a dismayingly aggressive manner.

The vessels had already shown startled awareness of Bade and the roc, scattering amid flashes of blue-white brilliance from the propulsion tubes at their sterns. Now they were swinging back. In the next instant beams of light leaped out from their tapering bows, arrowing toward Yasmina.

Frantically, Bade returned his attention to the talisman, forcing himself to ignore the obviously lethal rays for the moment. He peered into the depths of the jewel, trying to get the grayness into focus. It came—and abruptly the starry void and the attacking ships were gone. He and Yasmina were back in that familiar, formless and placeless gray mist.

"Are you all right?" Bade asked. He continued his thought to give a brief explanation of what had happened.

"I was not injured," the roc's whisper answered. "It was fortunate that you acted quickly. The talisman must be handled with caution."

Bade described what he had been attempting to do when he had accidently projected the roc and himself. He finished, "It's still a question whether my possession of the talisman will exclude me from the plane I want to reach, because Meznir also possesses a talisman."

"I believe that would happen," the response came. "However, it is a matter for El Khad to decide."

"But how could I possibly locate him?"

"With the talisman anything is possible. You can make easy for me a task which I have found impossible to accomplish."

Bade learned that he had simply to focus into the talisman the desire to find El Khad. However remote the magician was, the thought would reach him.

GAZING into the jewel, Bade concentrated intently. After a moment he received an impression of tremendous distance. His awareness seemed to plumb this distance, to wing through it with inconceivable speed. Plane beyond alien plane, he soared—beyond and ever beyond, to what seemed the very end of all creation. And there, floating in physical suspension within a sphere of *being* just large enough to enclose his body, he found El Khad.

The old magician's mind reached out like an eager hand, incredulous, delighted, questioning. Swiftly, Bade explained how he had spanned the gulf separating them, and his reasons for so doing. With the flashing speed possible in mental contact, he sketched his own

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personal background, the method of his arrival in Jahlad, and the sequence of events there which had led up to this moment.

In turn, El Khad told briefly how he had been tricked out of the talisman by Achmed and imprisoned within the sphere. He went on, "It is impossible for me to leave this place until the talisman in Meznir's possession is destroyed. He has not had sufficient depth of mind to be able to locate me, but he has set up certain conditions to prevent my return. In combination with those previously created by Achmed, an impenetrable barrier has been erected against me. The simplest and swiftest way to remove that barrier is by destroying the one thing that keeps it in force—the talisman Meznir now holds in his grasp."

"That's what I hope to do," Bade returned grimly. "But I don't know if it is possible for me to reach Meznir."

"It is," El Khad said. "You have simply overlooked a certain detail. As you have guessed, your possession of a duplicate talisman has created a paradoxical situation. You could not enter Meznir's plane unless the talisman he has is destroyed. But since each of you possesses an identical instrument, you can easily make contact across the probability gulf. That is, because he also has a talisman, Meznir will be real to you, though his plane will not."

Bade's thought was fiercely eager. "Then I'm going to arrange a little meeting at once. There is much that Meznir and I have to discuss."

"I understand." El Khad seemed to shiver, slightly. "But before you go, there is certain information that you will need. Prepare your mind to receive it."

Knowledge began pouring into Bade, a strange knowledge that seemed compounded of highly abstruse theoretical science and outright sorcery. He did not know how long the process went on, though in a medium where no time effect existed, he had the impression that a very long interval passed.

Finally he was ready. He withdrew his mind from El Khad, and almost in the same instant was back with the roc. First enlightening her as to what had taken place, he began outlining swift plans.

Yasmina started into purposeful motion, utilizing the uncanny instinct that would bring Bade within perception of the plane he wanted to reach.

The palace at Jahlad appeared through the grayness, again weirdly distorted. And again it seemed to leap toward Bade, suddenly magnified, its series of repeated images stretching away into the distance on either side.

Yasmina quested along the forward extension, while Bade peered into the talisman. He wanted to choose a dramatic moment for his encounter with Meznir. The most likely was the scene of the latter's marriage to Najla. His appearance would interrupt the ceremony with devastating effect.

But strangely the scene could not be found. And then, concentrating intently upon the talisman, Bade came upon a tableau within the audience hall of the palace that made his mind harden with abrupt purpose.

Meznir was seated upon the chair atop the dias, his dark features twisted in rage. Before him, gripped on either side by guards, stood Tarnib. The youth's slender body was straight and determined as he returned Meznir's wrathful gaze with cool defiance.

Through the talisman, Bade gathered that Meznir was questioning Tarnib. The subject of the quiz, it became evident, was Najla. The girl had disappeared. And somehow Tarnib had fallen into Meznir's hands—into a dan-

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ger immediate and deadly, for Meznir was convinced that the youth was responsible for Najla's vanishment. Tarnib was being threatened with torture unless he revealed Najla's hiding place.

Suddenly Bade awoke to the fact that in his interest and excitement he had not been careful enough in spying on the scene. For Meznir had leaped to his feet, and was now peering startledly into the depths of his talisman.

Bade realized he had been discovered.

CHAPTER XV

IMMEDIATE action was required now, Bade knew. Meznir must have no time to prepare a defense.

He didn't hesitate. From the knowledge El Khad had given him, he knew precisely what to do. He directed certain thoughts into his talisman, and abruptly he was soaring through the grayness. Phantom-like, he floated through the palace walls and into the audience hall. He was unreal in relation to this plane. The apparently material aspects of it were no barrier to him.

He came to a stop before Meznir. Only Meznir was real. Tarnib and the others were wraith-like.

"We meet again," Bade said quietly. "But this time, Meznir, the circumstances have changed."

The other was staring. Chaotic emotions showed on his square face—surprise, bewilderment, disbelief. He gasped, "You! But it is impossible! I sent you to certain death!"

Bade shrugged. "It proves you can't keep a good man down."

And then Meznir noticed Bade's talisman. His black eyes flared wide, his full lips curled back in a grimace. His body stiffened, crouching. In the next instant he exploded into frantic action. His hands tightened spasmodically on the talisman about his neck, his thoughts drove into it like a searing beam.

A bolt of lethal force leaped out at Bade. It was a phenomenon he sensed rather than saw in the utter rapidity with which it materialized. But he was prepared. The bolt struck the shield he had erected and glanced off in a pyrotechnic display of brilliance.

Almost at the same time Bade launched a bolt of his own. Meznir, tardily throwing up a barrier, was hurled back across the room, his incipient defense torn down.

"I could kill you now," Bade said, his thought implacable and cold. "But you have too much to answer for. This, *effendi* Meznir, is just the beginning."

Trapped, animal fury blazed in Meznir's mind. He moved as though to stand erect—then, simultaneously, he thrust an incandescent blade of force at Bade. It struck his shield with a violent impact, staggering him. Its unutterably fierce radiations burst into a coruscating shower about him. With furious rapidity, it struck again and again, driving him back.

Bade fashioned a blade of his own, parried the next descent of Meznir's, then drove in a sudden assault. The other darted aside, but Bade gave him no opportunity to recover completely. He pressed his momentary advantage, slashing, thrusting, keeping his opponent on the defensive.

In desperation, Meznir leaped from within immediate range. Abandoning his present line of battle, he again hurled a bolt at Bade, following it up with others as swiftly as he could produce and dispatch them.

Bade flung up his shield, deflecting the first few, but the savage violence of the rest forced him to retreat. Then the quality of his shield changed, be-

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came a condition in which the blasts of energy were captured and held. He launched the whole, and Meznir hastily took cover, shuddering under the impact.

Back and forth across the chamber the battle raged, not entirely within it, yet not entirely out of it. The chamber was merely a focal point of a conflict that took place beyond all planes, and only an echo of it reached there. But even that echo was a storm of forces that shook the walls and bathed them in kaleidoscopic patterns of lurid radiance.

MEZNIR shifted from weapon to weapon in his efforts to find a weak spot in Bade's armor, through which he could drive in a supreme onslaught. Hardly had one attack been met, when he followed with another.

But Meznir's ability to use the talisman in his possession was based upon information he had obtained from El Khad's notes. And the old magician had known certain devastating tricks and techniques which he had not recorded. Bade had been given these. They constituted an edifice of superhuman ability whose mighty walls were rooted deep in the foundations of his mind.

He took everything Meznir had to offer—and countered with even more punishing blows of his own. Slowly Meznir's attacks weakened. The intensity and brilliance of his bizarre weapons dwindled. At last only his shield remained, flickering dully. He crouched behind it in exhaustion, red embers of defiance glowing through the fear and desperation that filled his mind.

Bade released a soft mental laugh. "You're beaten, *effendi* Meznir—beaten as all your kind sooner or later are. Nastiness is something that always catches up with its users."

Meznir said slowly, "It may be, digger of holes, that you are wrong. What you term nastiness often has its advantages." The thought rose over the black intention in his mind, obscuring it for the few instants he needed. As the last echoes of it reached Bade, he acted with desperate cunning. Pouring his last dregs of strength into a final effort, he hurled a vicious bolt at Bade. And as it struck Bade's shield and exploded into a geyser of blinding, scintillant energy, he whirled in a flash of movement toward the spot where Tarnib lay, stunned and shaken, against a wall. He snatched the youth up, held him as a screen.

"One move, *effendi* Sinbad, and Tarnib dies!"

Recovering from the fury of the bolt, Bade felt a chill dismay strike through him. In the danger and intensity of the struggle, he had overlooked Tarnib. Meznir had remembered the youth in time to make a crafty attempt to ward off otherwise certain defeat.

In his anxiety, Bade started forward. A stinging lash of thought from Meznir stopped him.

"Careful! I can kill Tarnib in an instant. You dare not use the forces of your talisman against me, for they would destroy Tarnib as well. Keep that in mind."

Bade stood quietly, inwardly raging. He knew the other was right.

"I am now going to leave this plane," Meznir went on. "And Tarnib is going with me. He will pay with his life if you try to follow."

Bade's distress grew. He realized that it would be impossible to locate Meznir once the other succeeded in escaping. With his talisman, he could construct barriers against detection by Bade's own instrument. And there would always be the danger that Mez-

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nir would return to strike unexpectedly, to catch Bade completely off guard and regain control.

Tarnib had been dazed by the conflict, which, though it had not reached into his three-dimensional basis of reality, had nevertheless left its effects. Now, evidently jolted into full awareness by Meznir's grasp, he showed sudden understanding of the situation. His slender body erupted into frantic action, kicking and struggling. His turban was knocked from his head, and from beneath its confining folds fell a stream of shining brown hair. Instantly his appearance altered.

Meznir froze with shock and incredulity, staring. And Bade stared, too. In that moment both reached a conclusion which, to all previous evidence, seemed wildly impossible.

Tarnib was . . . *Najla!*

While Meznir still stared, the girl broke free. And in his confused state of mind Meznir made a mistake. He forgot to erect his shield. He forgot Bade entirely. He plunged after Najla.

Hardly had he moved, when hands of force caught him, fixed vise-like about his throat. They squeezed relentlessly, mercilessly. There was a snapping sound— and Meznir's neck broke. His body sagged limply against the invisible fingers holding him, a shell suddenly without movement, without threat . . . without life.

Sickened, Bade now directed a beam of energy at the remains, and under its bright, consuming touch, Meznir and his talisman were dissolved into primal particles.

Without pausing, Bade once again directed his mind into the talisman, this time to remove the sphere from about El Khad, and to set up the conditions which would accomplish the old magician's swift return to Jahlad. Then, and only then, did he feel competent enough to deal with the starkly incredible fact that Tarnib and Najla were one and the same.

THE garden was cool and fragrant. Through the evening shadows deepening over it came the splashing of fountains and the twittering of birds.

Bade and Najla sat on a marble bench before a small pool. Nearby stood El Khad, short and gnome-like, stroking his white beard. He was grinning in sympathy with Najla, who with head thrown back, was laughing merrily at the expression on Bade's face.

Bade stammered, "Do you mean that you were Tarnib all the time . . . on the island . . . here, at the palace?"

"Of course," Najla said. "As I have explained, there never was a Tarnib. My father felt the lack of a son keenly, for he wished his dynasty to continue as rulers of Jahlad. A girl could not rule, since it would be against custom. Women are not permitted to take part in public or political affairs. They could not command the respect due a male ruler, and hence there would be internal as well as external difficulties.

"But since my father had been burdened with a daughter, he had to make the best of it. In fact, it was I who convinced him. It was decided to create the identity of Tarnib. With the talisman, El Khad produced conditions in which Tarnib was accepted as a real person, and all those involved in the deception were shifted to a new plane of probability.

"Only a very few knew the secret. I adopted the guise as Tarnib for matters of state, alternating with my true identity when it became necessary. When Meznir conquered Jahlad, for instance, I realized that my life would be best insured by becoming Najla. And when Meznir forced me into a promise of marriage, I became Tarnib."

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Bade shook his head wonderingly. "I should have guessed it. You were a bit too much like Tarnib, and Tarnib a bit too much like you."

"But you were fooled, were you not?"

"Yes," Bade admitted ruefully. "And Meznir as well."

"He is gone," Najla said, a momentary shadow touching her face. "Just as the last remnants of his rule in Jahlad are gone. El Khad saw to that."

"It was nothing," the old magician said, with a wave of one small hand. "Sinbad did the really important work. There was little left for me to do."

"And now I suppose you will want to return to your own world in time," Najla said to Bade.

He narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. He frowned and pinched the lobe of his ear. "I've been thinking about that. And I think I will." He grinned abruptly. "As a vacation, if things here ever become too much for me. El Khad told me a return was possible."

The old magician nodded. "A simple matter. The mechanics are interesting. You have only to trace the prob—"

"I'm sure you can explain that later," Najla broke in. "Sinbad and I have certain matters to discuss."

El Khad chuckled. "You can save your breath. There is little use in pretending that you have to lead Sinbad into talk of marriage. Didn't I show you the ceremony taking place, with the talisman?"

Najla rose in dismayed confusion. "But you were not to have told!"

"That's quite all right," El Khad returned imperturbably. "Sinbad knows already. What I showed you in the talisman was his idea!"

THE END

The Melancholy Dane

☆ By CARTER T. WAINWRIGHT ☆

EVERYONE knows and loves Shakespeare's "Hamlet." Among fantasy lovers especially, it has a unique hold. Confused and maddened Hamlet, mentally deranged Ophelia, the whole host of characters that sprang full blown from the master's brain are probably the most immortal that have ever been created.

For the first time we are to have the pleasure and privilege of seeing this incomparable masterwork in the movies. Lawrence Olivier has again created an incredibly fine piece of artistry. Critics who have seen the film have raved over it.

What makes it particularly appealing to lovers of the fantastic, is the fact that it is filmed with such sensitive understanding. It is in black and white, not lavish technicolor, in order to keep with the tense and sombre mood that the play demands. Films of this sort are causing Hollywood no end of anxiety, as everyone knows. Of late, the finest work in fantasy has been done by the British.

For some unknown reason, as any lover of fantasy can tell, Hollywood fantasy films do not ring the bell, whereas the English importations almost always manage to convey that indescribable air of half-fantasy, half-fact, that leaves the observer breathless. Hollywood fantasies merely seem to make the observer bored. There is no subtlety or understanding. Everything is done on a lavish technical scale, but in the matter where it really counts, the presentation of the fantasy itself, Hollywood leaves us cold.

Who will fail to remember that gem, "Stairway to Heaven." It was worthy of the best in any fantasy fiction that we've read. Of course Hollywood has done some fine things. The first Frankenstein pictures, as well as other fantasies were done superbly, but in recent years there has been an awful tendency to give the effect of "I don't care."

In "Hamlet" Olivier does not stick strictly to the original text but takes liberties where he sees fit, to suit the mood of the film. Like any wise craftsman he realizes that working in movies is working in a different medium than the stage. Logically then he proceeds to exploit that fact, instead of simply attempting to transfer the stage play to the screen. The net result is that he achieves an unquestionable success. Hollywood would do well to take some cues from him or to watch the success of some of its own notable members, among them Orson Welles.

* * *

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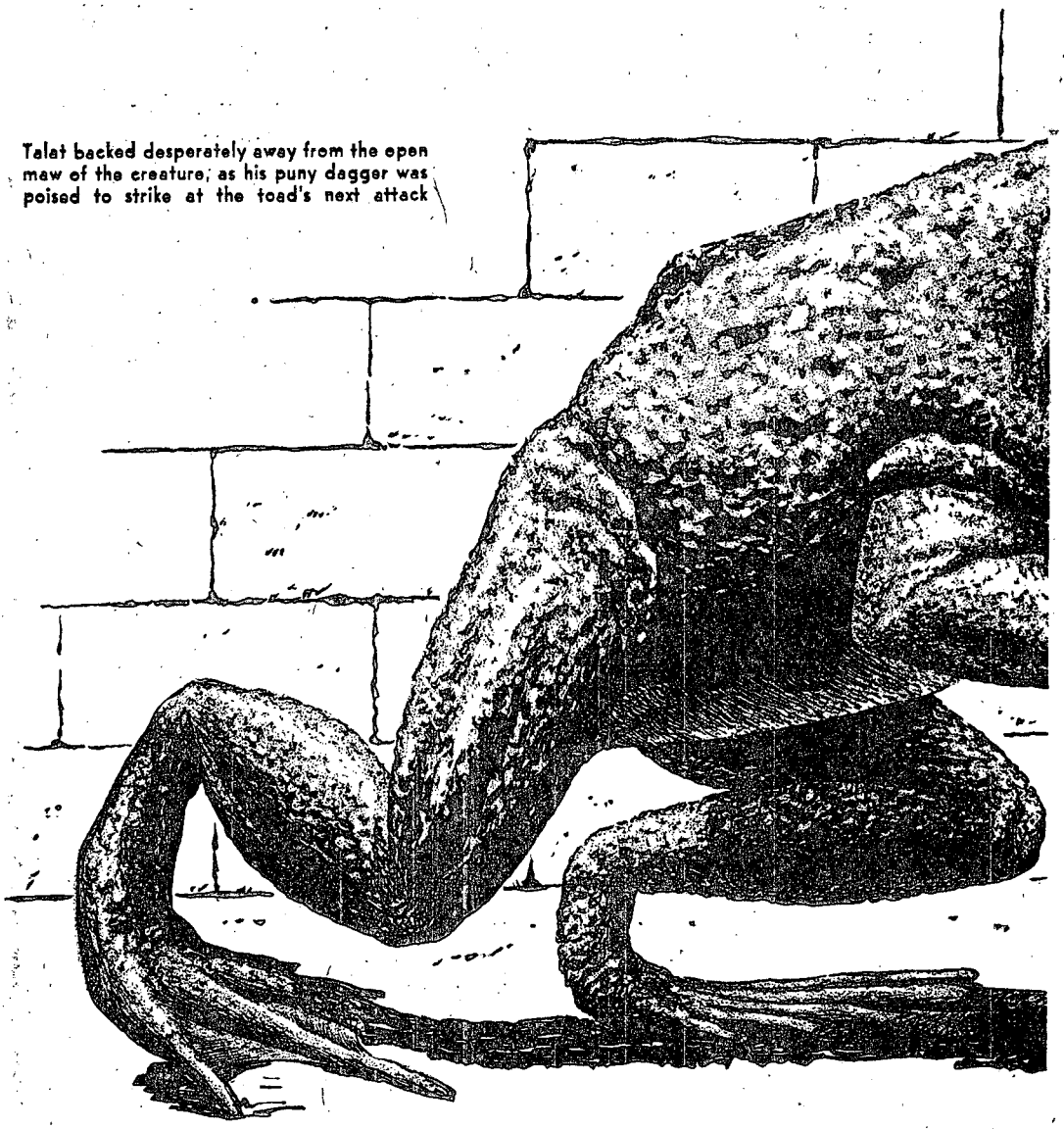
The Devil Of Doom

by A. Morris

In Talat's veins flowed the blood of kings, and yet he roamed the spaceways an outcast—for Lather had planned it thus



Talat backed desperately away from the open maw of the creature, as his puny dagger was poised to strike at the toad's next attack

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"TELL me more of this wonderful adventurer of yours," Lathar commanded.

Mota, leader of the King's forces, bowed his head to the command and continued:

"He lies in wait out there where the space freighters fly their courses and pounces upon them, like a mad toad. Only three ships, but they are as three thousand, for the damage they can do. Aye, mighty Lathar! He is a devil! And we must be rid of him."

Lathar's fingers caressed the marble-white shoulders of his favorite concubine. They slipped lower and encircled the bared waist of the girl, holding her in a firm familiarity.

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The girl looked up at him and smiled. Her white teeth matched the whiteness of her half-nude body. But Lathar's touch and interest were only physical. His mind was at work on this nemesis who had suddenly, like a comet of destruction, appeared on the scene of his rule and seemed bound to make rubble of the highways of space that Lathar's ships of commerce flew.

"And what is this sprightly sprig called?" Lathar asked.

"He has many names," Mota replied. "By some, he is called the mad pirate. By others, the avenger. And by the men of our air fleet, the devil of doom. I fear no man, mighty Lathar, but this pirate has me worried."

"The avenger," Lathar murmured, his fingers falling from the girl's bared waist. He suddenly leaned forward on his throne and the court and all those watching and listening were stilled. "What an odd name! And what does our friend take vengeance on?"

Mota felt a flush of embarrassment steal over his features. He lowered his eyes and failed to reply.

"Well!" Lathar's eyes, purple-irised, flamed in sudden anger.

"No one seems to know," Mota said softly, trying to turn the wrath of his king. "Probably for some obscure reason. These pirates need no reason other than loot. And if the people . . ."

"The people! What do the people know of this?" Lathar half-rose from his seat at mention of the people.

Mota's eyes went wide. Was it possible that the king didn't know how matters stood in his realm? But the question had been answered by the king's startled manner. He didn't know.

Lathar's lips spread wide and his voice boomed out in laughter. Like machines which the king had set in motion, the rest of the court tittered. And like machines, they stopped when the king did.

"So my people know more of this than I do," Lathar said. His eyes were still crinkled in laughter, and his voice seemed almost merry, but Mota knew better. It was at such times that Lathar was most to be feared. "My people!" Lathar continued, and there was a world of contempt in his voice. "So the time has come when they have reached the age of knowledge. Treasonable knowledge. It seems that their king has been too lenient with them. I must remedy that situation. And at once. Mota!"

"Sire?" Mota came to attention.

"Our jails are hungry, I think," Lathar said. "Fill their stinking maws with a sufficiency of food. Certainly your secret police can find enough of these glib-tongued, treason-spouting, know-it-alls who deem it proper to know more than their king. And while your men are at it, be sure to wring their knowledge from them. You understand, I hope, Mota?"

Mota paled at the lips. He knew. Another reign of terror. It had been a number of years since the last. Well, it was a command. And one from which there was no recourse.

"I understand, Sire," Mota said.

"Then go. And when you return, I will want to hear more of this pirate of yours. In fact, if you could bring him here, I would be even more pleased. Particularly if he is in chains."

JENDU, self-styled hawk of the skies, stared at his leader. There was a look bordering on worship in his eyes. How, he thought, could anyone look so innocent, so handsome and carefree, so untroubled as this man before him, and have the police, the military of an entire universe at his heels? He shrugged shoulders so

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broad he could only step through the pilot's port, sideways. Then he was at instant attention. His chief had come to a decision.

"Jendu," the tall, blond man in the skin-tight space suit, whose figure was like that of a god's, had begun to talk. "I think we have been a thorn long enough. The time has come when we must be more. A sword! And what a sword. Not the clumsy weapon of Mota's minions. Oh, no. We will be something that will prick, stab, wound, but not kill; not until the proper moment."

Jendu looked with dismay at his leader. Had Talat gone out of his mind? What was this talk of swords? What new, mad venture was in this man's mind? Wasn't it bad enough to flaunt Lathar's secret police by hiding out in the very city that bore the name of its king? Jendu shook his head in bewilderment.

Talat only smiled more broadly. It was as if he had read the other's mind.

"Jendu does not shy from danger that *might* come?" Talat taunted.

The other flushed. "Jendu fears nothing. Neither man, beast or danger, present or otherwise," Jendu said, straightening the thick, short body that was like a keg of wine.

"That's more like my Jendu," Talat said, throwing his arms around the other. "Now hear me out," he went on. "My beautiful little ships are in their nests up there in those mountains. Nobody knows of them. And here we are, one hundred and fifty men, pirates all, with prices on our heads, whose every moment is filled with danger. Mota would sacrifice every man-jack of his police if he could take even one of us. Yet we are under his very nose! Hah! I boast, eh, Jendu?"

Jendu placed a heavy palm against the other's chest and shoved, lightly. Talat reeled back, recovered his balance and then laughed softly, as Jendu said:

"Like a cock among a hundred hens. In my old age, I grow curious about things. Why do you do this?"

"There are reasons for everything. For black being black, for white being white and for Talat being a—fool. Watch and listen."

Talat stepped back, let his head drop slightly so that it seemed to rest slightly askew on the molded neck, drew his chest in, and spoke in a thick, coarse voice:

"These vermin! We must rid ourselves of them. Lathar has spoken."

Jendu's lips parted and his eyes widened at the mimicry. An involuntary cry of admiration escaped him. "But it is Lathar to the very sound of his voice! I would think it was the tyrant I was hearing—and facing."

Talat straightened. The smile still was on his lips. It was as though he was waiting for something. Then Jendu understood.

"You are going to abduct Lathar?" he asked hesitantly.

Talat nodded.

Jendu exploded a fist into a palm.

"By the mad toads! What a thought! What an idea! But how? The palace is guarded by too many men. And when Lathar makes one of his infrequent visits into the city, he makes sure that no one man, or one thousand, can get to him."

"Listen, old hawk with the body of a toad," Talat said softly. "What is there in this world we live in, that Lathar would want most?"

Jendu shrugged his shoulders in a negative sign.

"Oh, fine! Fine!" Talat exclaimed in disgust. "I only hope Lathar sets a higher value on my head than you. Why me, of course!"

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JENDU exploded in laughter. This young cock! This finely-tempered sword! But it was true what he said. Lathar would turn his kingdom upside down, to lay his hands on Talat. Did Talat think Jendu was an utter fool? Of course Jendu understood. Talat was going to, to . . .

Talat answered the unspoken question.

"It is five years since first I began to irritate our king. Nor has he once in those years so much as even seen one of us. So that should Jendu, let us say, approach Mota and say that he, Jendu, can lead Mota to the lair of Talat, would Mota know that it was a trap?"

"Knowing our friend Mota, I would say that he would be highly suspicious."

"Granted. But if the news was spread that Jendu and his leader had quarreled, and Jendu wanted immunity for his tale's telling, how would Mota think, then?"

"H'm," Jendu thought that over. He didn't like it and said so.

"But why, Jendu?" Talat asked.

"Too many factors we can't take into account," Jendu said, laying his fingers on the very weakness that should have been apparent to Talat. "Look, boy," he argued, "when we attack cargo liners up there in the great void of space, we are in direct and simple action. Our course is plain, one ship or two or how many there may be, against ours. But here, how do we know that Mota will believe, and if he does, whether Lathar will come, and if he does, whether he will come alone. No, I don't like it!"

Talat brushed Jendu's objection aside.

"Don't you see," he said, "that's the beauty of my scheme, the boldness of it. Mota will think as you. Then he will think again, and say to himself that no man could be that foolhardy."

"Yes. Yes," Jendu put in. "But Lathar. Will he come alone?"

"I think so," Talat said thoughtfully. "I think he's that curious about me."

"Well," Jendu said, sighing deeply, "I see you have made your mind up. But one last question. Let us say that we are successful. What are you going to do then?"

An unexpected development made the two men switch their thoughts to other things. Just as Talat opened his mouth to tell Jendu what he was going to do, a man burst into the room. His eyes were wide in excitement and words bubbled on his parted lips:

"Sir! Sir, the city is full of Mota's men. They search from house to house. The twins, Laman and Malan, have seen them. They told me to warn you."

"What!" Jendu shouted. "The police! Stop that idiot's babbling and tell us where and how you heard this?"

"Yes, sir," said the youngster, for his youth was all too apparent in his manner and in his beardless face. "I walked the market place, as you told me, sir. The twins made rendezvous with me at the baker's shop. But even before they came, the police were already making their way through the market. Babu, the baker, hid the three of us in an empty kiln. Then when all was clear, I came to warn you. The twins are on their way to the others to warn them. They wait on your word."

"Those twins!" Talat exclaimed rapturously. "They're jewels. You know, Jendu, there is something about being twins that is exciting to the thought. Possibly I'm Lathar's twin. We look alike."

"Yes, yes," Jendu said impatiently. "But what do we do now?"

"We? You mean you," Talat said,

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grinning broadly. "This makes my plan far more simple and more certain. Jendu is going to take a walk and the police are going to take him into protective custody. They are going to question him. And, under duress of course, Jendu is going to tell them he is one of us. More, that he will lead them to my hideout, assuring them that I am quite alone. Quite alone."

The youngster looked from one to the other in perplexity. He stepped back in fright as Jendu slapped his palms together and shouted:

"That's it! That will hold up. But what of the men? How are we to arrange this ambush?"

Talat told him his plan in detail.

MOTA tapped nervous fingers against the smooth surface of the Cresa-stone desk that was a gift from Lathar. The vast machinery of search had been set into action, was still in motion, but the wheels were beginning to slow down. Only a few were left of the tens of thousands who might be suspect. The jails were full to bursting. The inquisitors could not handle the numbers of people, so many were there. And still no trace, no clue of this man who had made Mota's life miserable.

Mota slammed his fist down on the stone. It was as a signal. For of a sudden, the door to his office opened and two of the green-tuniced guards of his secret police entered. Between them, they dragged the pitiful figure of a man.

Mota looked at the bloodied, puffed up features, let his glance come down to the man's hands, and saw the bleeding, quivering fingers, from whose tips the nails had been torn, and barked:

"What is this, the slaughter-pen, that you drag this stinking hulk in this way?"

The two came to attention. And the man between slipped to the floor.

"Sir," one of them said, "this one has confessed to being one of those you seek."

Mota looked at the guard, coldly.

"Take him out, clean him up and bring him back," he said. "And give him some food and drink. He looks like he hasn't had any in a few days," Mota commanded.

They were back in a short while. The prisoner looked a bit changed. There was still the puffiness of swollen flesh, particularly in the cheeks and lips, but he was clean of face and the blood had been wiped from his mouth. They stood him in front of the seated man and stepped back a few feet to stand at rigid attention.

"Well!" Mota barked. "What is this tale you've invented?"

"No. No! I swear it's the truth! I do not lie . . ."

"All right! And before you start, let me warn you. They only tore your finger nails loose. If you lie, I'll have them tear your arms loose. One at a time!"

"Yes. Yes," the prisoner went on hurriedly. It was as if he was anxious to get his confession over and done with, so that perhaps then he would have some peace. "My name is Jendu," he went on. "I was Talat's second in command. We quarreled—"

"About what?" Mota broke in on the babbling voice.

"Talat wanted to raid the king's palace. I said no. But he said he would force me—"

Again Mota broke in. "Never mind that! Forget that I asked you why you quarreled. What I want to know is where is this Talat man? Where is his hideout? How many men does he have?"

The prisoner licked his cracked, torn lips. He was obviously terrified. Twice

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he tried to talk and both times stopped before a word could come through the quivering flesh.

Mota stood, sullenly, and came around the massive desk and stood before Jendu. Jendu fell back a few feet, half-turned as if to flee, then hesitated, tremblingly, as the guards made a move to intercept him.

"Speak, you idiot!" Mota's voice crackled menacingly.

"Yes, yes," Jendu said in a quaver. "Talat is here in the city. He and another. The rest of his men are in the hills where the ships are hidden. I was on my way to the police when they dragged me off the street and tortured me even when I wanted to talk. Look how they have broken my fingers and torn the nails. Why have they done this? . . ."

Jendu had become a monotonous voice who had suddenly learned to talk and could not stop but had to go on and on until someone put a halt to his babbling.

"Shut up and listen!" Mota commanded sharply.

". . . I have done nothing. They struck me, tortured . . . Ow, no!" the voice ended in a scream as one of the guards struck him a blow at the back of the neck, at Mota's silent command.

"Where is this man hiding?" Mota asked in a suddenly normal tone.

The strange quietness of the words penetrated through the numbed faculties of the prisoner. If Mota had been more observant, he would have noticed the change in the expression of Jendu's eyes. But he didn't see it.

"In jail," Jendu said.

Mota only stared; his mind didn't quite grasp what Jendu had said.

"In jail," Jendu repeated. "At the outskirts of the city there is that condemned community where the pestilence was discovered some years back. Lathar condemned the whole district, including the district jail. Talat figured it would be the last place where anyone would look for him."

Mota felt a vast exhilaration sweep through him. By all that was holy! He had the devil! There was no doubt in his mind of the truth of Jendu's words. Lathar's gratitude would know no bounds. But first he had to get all the information. Mota's credulity had an almost unnatural suspicious cast.

"How long has he been there?" he asked.

"Four days," Jendu replied.

"And how many fighters were with the last space liner?"

"Six," Jendu said automatically.

"And the cargo?" Mota continued on the strange tack.

"Nothing," Jendu answered. "A thousand fighting men in the hold."

MOTA laughed, a sharp sound that echoed through the square-built room. Jendu lifted his head with the last of the echo. The numbness had passed off at last. He gave silent thanks to Mota. Had the man permitted another half hour of beatings, Jendu knew that his capacity to resist would have ended. He would have told more, everything, in fact. He felt weak. Never had he imagined such an ordeal. He could understand how men went mad from the inquisition and babbled anything if only the inquisitors would stop the torture. His hands felt numb but already the numbness was beginning to pass and the terrible pain was becoming a living thing again, as it had been when they had pulled the nails from the living flesh. His face was tough, scarred from a hundred fights. The new blows they had given had neither added to his looks nor taken anything from them. But the

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business with the nails . . .

"Bring this man a drink," Mota said, breaking in on Jendu's thoughts.

One of the guards wheeled and left. Mota sat at his desk again and busied himself with pen and paper. When he was done, he sealed the note he had written and handed it to the other guard, saying:

"Deliver this to the king's chamberlain. And say it is of the utmost importance, that the king must read it immediately. Go."

Mota looked up at Jendu and smiled conspiratorily. Jendu gave him a blank face.

"Oh, you don't have to be afraid any longer," Mota said. "All you have to do is lead us to this hideout . . ."

"Talat would kill me," Jendu said. Fear made his voice rise again, gave a bewildered brightness to his eyes. Talat would have been proud of his acting.

Mota continued to smile, his fingers again tapping the desk top.

"Look, my friend," he said. "There is nothing to fear any more. In a short while we will have this pirate all nicely wrapped and ready for the executioner. We wait only the king's arrival. Really, there isn't anything to it, now."

"But you have said, lead us to him. Talat will kill me."

"Death," Mota became the philosopher, "ends all of life's plans. But with a reasonable amount of foresight and caution, we can evade the hooded one for a while. You, my friend, were a pirate. As such, you took the constant risk of discovery and the punishment. Death and you walked hand in hand, night and day. Why this sudden fear of him? At any rate, the king is generous with those who are loyal. Besides, you have done a great good by talking. Perhaps the, shall we say, confession of your sins, will find the king in a forgiving mood? If so, amnesty is yours."

"But Talat will kill me," Jendu seemed possessed of a single thought.

Mota regarded him reflectively.

"And it was with such as you that this Talat worked. Incredible! I don't see how he did it. Yes, damn it, he may kill you! But I am not going to put the king in danger. You are going to walk in there and tell this man you were freed, but that you heard he is in danger and had better flee for his life. Then you will lead him, by a route I will select, to safety. Have no fear, we will be waiting. Ah! The king!"

Lathar had entered and Mota rose to his feet, bowing deeply.

JENDU turned and looked closely at the tyrant. He marvelled at the resemblance between Talat and the king. It was as if Lathar was a distorted image of the other. There were the same characteristics. But in Lathar the refinement and beauty were missing. There was a coarseness to the face, the lips pouted, the head was angled toward the right shoulder, the chest was drawn in, there was an overall laxness to his carriage.

Lathar removed the heavily brocaded purple cape he wore. Beneath he was dressed in the green tunic of the secret police. On his shoulder, the insignia of the Supreme Commander blinked brightly in the light of the overhead fixtures.

"Good work, Mota," Lathar said. "Where is the rascal?"

Mota told him.

"So," the king said. "The pestilence returned to its old quarters. But this time we will wipe it out completely, eh, Mota?"

"Yes, sire," Mota replied. "This man will lead us to him."

Lathar looked directly at Jendu for the first time. It was then Jendu real-

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ized that though the king looked a weakling, the appearance was deceiving. The eyes which held his own were amber in color, or purple; it was hard to tell in the light, but they were steadfast and searching. Nothing escaped their steady look. Jendu felt his stomach muscles twitch.

"So this is one of them," Lathar said. "Looks more like one of those who hang about wine shops. But, if you are satisfied . . ."

"I am, sire. I asked him questions about this Talat's last attack that could only have been answered by one who was there. Oh, he is one of them all right."

"And what is your plan?" Lathar asked.

"We can lose no time. This Talat may have fled already, though this vermin claims no. I have arranged for an escort of ten men . . ."

"Amnesty!" Jendu bleated suddenly. There was something about the way the king looked that Jendu did not like. And he thought he knew the answer. The whole plot hinged on the king's desire to get to Talat as quickly as possible, without thinking of the danger involved. Jendu knew it was the true weakness in the plan. So he acted again to gain their attention and take the king's mind away from whatever he was thinking. "Amnesty! You promised."

"What is this of amnesty?" Lathar asked.

Mota told him.

"Oh give the fool his life. I'm not interested in him anyway. But this Talat. Ah! There is a man I want to see. Only not alone, or as you have planned, with ten men. I do not like the idea. It is as if you were a string he was pulling. For five years we have been bothered by this plague of a man. Now, of a sudden, he is in our grasp. Too suddenly. Another thing. Your men have been at work for three days now. Why is it that he hasn't had wind of the raids? How is it that this one here feels sure that Talat is still there?"

It would have been impossible for Jendu to show any great change in expression, what with the purple bruises and cuts on his face. But internally, he quaked with a new-born fear.

"Sire," he began, his voice a whimper, "I can explain that. Talat waits for the rest of his men. They plan a raid on the king's treasury here in the city. It was a coup he has long planned."

"Logical," Lathar said musingly. "Yes, it makes sense. Uh, let me see. You can tell us where the rest of his men are?"

"Yes, sire," Jendu said. And went into a detailed and completely false account of how and where the hide-away was.

"Good!" Lathar exclaimed when Jendu was done. "Mota, you will send a full battalion of men to this mountain place. Surround them and exterminate them to the last one. Have four full companies accompany us to this place where Talat hides. Hurry now, man. Let's get going."

TWO of the three moons swung their silver bodies across the star-streaked sky. The night was almost as bright as the day. And whoever was abroad at that hour in the sprawling vastness that was the city of Lathar wondered at the sudden activity centered in the central jail. Couriers sped back and forth to the military garrison in the center of the city. Some few, who loved the night better than the day, saw the king, himself, walk out of the jail in the company of the dread Mota. Beside them was the short thick figure of a man whose face bore the signs

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of a terribly severe beating.

Then there was the sound of marching feet and four companies of soldiers made their appearance. They waited for Lathar to assume the lead, and marched off towards the north outskirts of the city. It was a half hour march, but to Jendu it was that many seconds. He beat at his brain to tell him what to do. For surely Talat was lost, unless he could warn him.

They arrived at last at the new wall which had been put up as a safeguard when the plague had broken out. The old wall lay beyond, in a shallow depression that sloped down to the plain, some two miles away. The twin moons gave stark relief to the scene and etched in silver beauty the crumbled stone houses, empty of human life. The jail stood alone, like a pariah hound, among the simple, empty dwellings. No sign of life was there to show that Talat or anyone else was alive in all that desolation.

Mota called his captains to his side and gave them their instructions. There was another wait while the men deployed around the wall until there were some beyond the far wall and on the plain itself. When the men had the place completely surrounded, Mota gave the signal for the attack.

Jendu watched the slaughter, powerless either to join his friends or warn them of their danger. Four men guarded him. And in their hands were the short, thick naked blades that was their sole weapon. It would have been suicide for him to have made any deliberate attempt to escape.

Talat had planned well. But not as well as Lathar. Each of the stone houses had its complement of men, waiting for the arrival of Lathar. But they hadn't thought that the king would bring his army. They were a hundred against four hundred.

TALAT had known of their coming. He had men planted along the route to warn him of their approach. When he had found out that Lathar had crossed him up by bringing enough men to make Talat's attempt at abduction ridiculous, he had instantly dispatched the most of his force to his hideaway. Who remained were volunteers he had managed to pick up in the short time he had been in the city. It was always so. They flocked to him, offering their lives for the chance to fight against the tyrant Lathar. Well, he thought, now they were going to have that chance.

Each of them was armed. It would be man against man. Too bad, yet he deserved to lose. For he realized, then, that he had bungled badly in the whole thing. He was a much better general up there in the blue, when it was a question of ship against ship, nor did the number make any difference then.

"See," one of the men who was with him, said. "They are deploying around the outer wall."

Talat nodded. He had seen the maneuver long before the other had. His mind was busy. There was only one thing to do, and that quickly, before they had a chance to achieve mobility. Since Lathar's forces were in the midst of a maneuver, if he could catch them off balance he and his men might have a chance to escape. Instantly he made up his mind. Three couriers went out, shouting at the top of their lungs, "Attack! Attack. To the attack!"

And at their heels, Talat had swung into action. Directly toward the main body of troops in front of them, he led his men. Nor were Mota's men loath to join the fight. In a moment the advance was an inextricably mixed group, man against man, hacking, thrusting, chopping with their blades. And in the center of them all was Talat, his slender

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blade a whirling, flashing carrier of doom. Beside him were the pick of his men, proven fighters, afraid of nothing, thirsting only for the blood of their enemies.

Every now and then, Talat caught a glimpse of Lathar at the top of the small hill, Mota at his side. Slowly, and by the power of his arm alone, he forced the fighting to go away from the rim of the hill. Mota, observing the fight raging below, suddenly became aware of Talat's intention.

"Look!" he pointed toward the struggle. "He is trying to force them into that shallow gap. If he gets them in there, he'll chop them up. They won't be able to move around."

"If he escapes, Mota," Lathar said softly, "I'll have your body thrown to the toads."

Mota looked about him. There were some hundred odd men up there with him, a reserve force he had held back. Leaping to their head, he plunged down the hill toward the fighting. Talat might have won out had the fight gone another five minutes. But Mota's entrance spelled his doom. Mota's force struck his flank and bent it inward and around, so that of a sudden, Talat and his men were in the same trap he was preparing for the others.

Now the fight raged even more than before. Talat's sword ran red, the blood cascading down on his fingers making his grip become insecure. It was thrust and recover now. They were pressed too close for fancy sword work. More and more of Mota's reinforcements arrived. Talat fought upon a mound of dead. His arm was tired. Only by a miracle had his life been spared. More and more of the enemy were trying to give up their lives, if only to take him along. Yet he survived their most vicious swipes.

The man in front of Talat suddenly sobbed out something, and Talat saw the point of a sword emerge at the back of his neck. Before he could step aside, the dead man fell backward. And in trying to avoid the falling body, Talat stepped on another corpse which rolled under his feet. Before he could recover his balance, he tripped and went to his knees. And like a mad tide, the battle rolled over him. He lifted his head and a metal-shod foot struck him on the point of the chin. Consciousness left him in a blinding flash.

"SO THAT is the avenger," he heard a voice say.

He opened his eyes and looked about. He didn't have to feel his bonds to know that he was a prisoner. These grinning men around him were signs enough of that.

"Lift him up," Lathar said. "I want a good look at him."

Willing arms tugged him upright. Facing him was Lathar, Mota and Jendu. Before any of the others could prevent Jendu, he had stepped forward and had struck Talat two blows in the face, shouting:

"That. For the indignities I suffered. And that because I wait the chance to even up."

Several of Mota's men dragged Jendu away amidst squalls of laughter. The men enjoyed seeing Jendu strike the helpless prisoner. But only Talat had noticed Jendu spoke in the future tense. Jendu had pulled his punch. Yet as lightly as the blow had fallen it brought blood.

Both Mota and Lathar were grinning as the soldiers dragged Jendu aside.

"He has spirit," Mota said.

"Yes. Like carrion hunters, they sport on the dead," Lathar said. Then to Talat, "So you are the man who has been making life miserable for my Mota? Well, what now?"

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Talat grinned through his blood.

"This plan did not succeed, the next plan will," he said.

Lathar laughed. But Jendu's eyelids hooded the strange light that came into them. Now he had to escape. Talat had told him what to do. Well, it wouldn't be too hard.

"So you have other plans?" Lathar asked. "It's too bad you won't be able to put them into force. But speaking of plans, I have plans also. And you are the one who will be most affected by them. Right now I am weary. It was good sport, but it did not last long enough. Tomorrow, I will provide better."

He turned with the last word and marched off, his head, angled toward his shoulder, nodded back and forth as though he had the ague. Four men lifted the bound figure of Talat and carried him. There was much shouting and jesting as the captains gave the commands to fall in after sending out parties to kill the wounded, friend and foe alike. The resa birds would take care of their carcasses before the sun rose. Nor did anyone see Jendu slip among those who went out. He wasn't even missed.

TALAT looked about the bare stone wall of the dungeon into which he'd been cast and smiled reflectively. Jendu should be at the rendezvous by now. Tonight only a single moon, the smallest of the three, would illuminate the heavens. It would make the three ships silently skimming the low clouds almost invisible. Their anti-rada equipment would foil any effort to pick up their trail. In the meantime he was waiting for the sun to come up and herald a new day. He wondered, idly, what refined torture Lathar had in mind for him.

He turned from looking at the wall at a sound of feet coming down the stone flags of the dungeon walk. It was the jailer. With him were three guards. They were armed and wore their swords in the open.

"All right, you," the jailer said, throwing the barred door wide. "Out you go. And no funny business. These men'll put holes in you at the first sign."

Talat smiled and moved in between two of them. The third acted as a rear guard. They ascended a steep curving stone staircase. It led upward for a long distance. Finally the lead man stopped before a locked door. Talat noticed that the staircase continued upward. And far ahead, he saw the glimmer of light. The guard pushed the door open and went through. Talat and the other two followed. They entered a small, square room. Here one of the guards produced chains, and while the other two watched that Talat made no move to escape, the first bound him securely in the chains. Then they passed through another door and directly into the king's chamber, where Lathar was entertaining lavishly. The women lounged about, clad in the barest of essentials, the men, all of them dressed in the usual court dress of toga draped loosely around them, stood about in groups chatting, or sat with the women giving voice to flattery.

At the far end of the vast chamber, Lathar sat on his golden throne, his two favorite concubines at either side. A goblet of wine was in his right hand. He took a sip of the purple liquid as the guards began to march Talat down the aisle formed by the curious who came running to see the famous pirate.

A young girl, no more than twenty, stepped directly into the path of the prisoner. The guards had to bring him to a halt. She smiled up into the handsome face. Talat returned the smile

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and she said to him:

"A touch of your lips, my sweet, and I shall be yours, ever."

She placed her hands on the statuesque shoulders and stepped forward, on tiptoe. As Talat bent to kiss the red mouth, she suddenly drew back, and before he could avert his face, she spat full into it. A shout of laughter went up. Lathar, watching from the throne, joined in. But at the end, he called the girl up to him.

She came and stood beside him, while the other two at his side glowered their hatred of her. Lathar waited until Talat was brought before him. He turned to the girl, then, and said:

"So you don't like my twin, do you?"

The court fell silent at the words. Many had noticed the resemblance and had whispered of it even as Talat was being brought forward. Their suspicions were confirmed now.

The girl looked her bewilderment, first to Lathar, then to Talat.

"Well?" Lathar's voice was soft, but in menace.

Terror suddenly filled the girl's eyes.

"Come here, my sweet," Lathar said.

She came and stood directly in front of him.

"He is my twin," Lathar said. "And bears the same royal blood. It is not right that such as you spit on him."

THE girl shrank from the open menace in the king's eyes. He thrust out a hand and caught her wrist, drawing her toward him. She seemed hypnotized by what she saw in his eyes. Only Talat saw his hand reach for the small dagger at his waist. His warning cry came too late. Lathar plunged the dagger into her throat, to the very hilt. His hand still held her wrist as she swayed, but as her knees gave way, he relaxed his grip. The girl slumped to the floor, bathed in the crimson of her flowing blood.

"She was too young. But the rest of you are old enough. Vengeance is mine alone. Turn around, brother," Lathar commanded.

Talat only smiled. But the guards twisted him about until he faced the court.

"Look at him," Lathar said. "He is handsome, isn't he! Proud, too. My mother's pride. But he has a single fault, my father's. A stubborn willfulness. Well, I'll cure him of that. Won't I, Talat?"

"Like you killed our father?" Talat turned and asked calmly. "That made you king. Rightfully so. But you didn't know of me, did you?"

"But I did. You were full-grown when I found out I was a twin. And when I sent the men to slay you, someone had warned you. Now I have you in my power. And this time you will not escape."

"If I do," Talat said, "I'll come back and destroy you forever. The people have suffered your tyranny long enough. Now you want to conquer the universe, don't you?"

Lathar laughed aloud.

"Oh, good. Good! You too have spies. And I see that they have told you of my plan to break the covenant of the universe. The atom is mine to do with as I please. I shall use it to whatever purpose I wish."

"Not if I can stop it," Talat said.

"But you can't, dear brother. Didn't that wise man who raised you tell you that in us flows the blood of madmen? I am mad. Yes. Quite mad. Yet sane enough to know that *you* are in my power and not the reverse. But enough of talk. I shall tell you what I'm going to have done to you.

"They tell of your courage and strength. I am going to test both. And perhaps other things also. Below this

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palace floor are three levels. Talat, brother dear, you are going to spend some time on each level. I have even named these havens of rest, for you. The first is the haven of desire. The next is the haven of hunger. And the last is the haven which all of us must reach, death. I am going to be greatly interested in seeing how you react."

Lathar stopped talking and raised a languid hand in a signal to the guards. Talat was seized, placed on two pairs of brawny shoulders and carried to the center of the palace floor. Once more Lathar raised his hand in a signal, this time to some unseen agency. And before the startled eyes of the court, a whole section of the floor sank downward, and with it Talat and his guards.

Several men came from the wings of the vast room. They carried a long, sectional ladder which they telescoped down to the waiting guards, who in the meantime had undone Talat's bonds sufficiently, so that although he could not get them off quickly enough to attack them, yet were loose enough so that in a short time he could free himself. The guards scurried up the ladder which was immediately drawn upward out of reach. Then a vast floor of glass-like material slid out of a groove and across the opening into another slot at the other end. When the glass partition was in place Lathar had his throne placed at one of the borders and sat down, his eyes viewing what was below. The rest of the court formed a square and watched also.

Talat only glanced up once, saw the glass screen slide into place, then gave all of his attention to his bonds. In a moment they fell away from him. He was free. But free in a glass-enclosed cubicle, no more than thirty feet square.

THERE was a sudden clicking sound and Talat looked around just in time to see four more screen sets slide into place. These were set between all the planes of his prison, so that there were layers of space between him and the walls beyond, on all sides. As far as he could see there was nothing behind the farthest walls. Only blackness met his eyes.

Talat sniffed loudly. Strange, heady perfumes were being wafted into his prison through concealed vents. Their scented odor worked strange things with him. His senses were suddenly stirred as by the cloying south wind that sometimes blew in from the hot, central plains. Hidden lights glowed in the spaces between the walls. And from behind the blackness scores of women came into the light. They were in various stages of undress, some completely nude, others with coverings only for the upper part of their bodies, and others only the lower part. With them came a collection of beasts and humans, all males.

An orgy followed such as Talat had never imagined possible. Voices came to him, telling him in exact detail of how wonderful it was what he was seeing. Talat closed his eyes, shutting out the panting twisting figures. He kept them closed for a long time, his mind emptied of all thoughts. But when he opened them, the figures were still there.

He bent all his will not to think of what he was seeing. Gradually peace came to him. His pulses no longer leaped. And he willed a desire to sleep. Stretching out full length, Talat closed his eyes. And suddenly the floor heaved so that he was tossed about. He looked up then and saw Lathar staring intently at him. He laughed up at the other. Lathar grinned crookedly in return. He knew those below were not having the effect he desired on the prisoner. He turned his glance away and

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nodded to someone in a signal.

Once more the platform on which Talat reclined, sank.

The business of the sliding screens was repeated again when the platform came to rest at last. Only this time nothing happened, though Talat waited a long time. Once more he reclined full length on the smooth floor and closed his eyes. Sleep came instantly.

Talat awoke. He did not know whether it was night or day. In the half gloom of his prison there was no way of knowing. He looked above and was surprised to see that Lathar still kept his vigil. Talat wondered why this part was called the haven of hunger. He yawned and realized that a long time had passed since he had eaten. Coincident with the thought, a curtain parted and two men came out. They bore a linen covered table between them. This they set down close to the inner glass. Then another man came out from behind the curtain. The man nodded a greeting to Talat and sat at the table. In a few seconds the servants appeared and set several plates of food on the table. The seated man began to eat. It was obvious that he enjoyed eating. For Talat was able to hear the sounds he was making. He would smack his lips loudly with each bite, and before taking a bite he would show Talat the particular bit of food. Talat felt hunger begin its gnawing at his vitals. Finally, the man finished his repast. Talat wiped the sweat from his brow and felt thankful that it was at an end. But no sooner had that man left than another made his appearance. He also nodded a greeting to Talat. Again the servants appeared with food. And again the gustatory exhibition. Saliva trickled down Talat's chin. He clenched his fists so hard the nails bit into the flesh. And all the while his hunger grew. It became torture when the tenth followed the ninth.

For a long time after the tenth diner left, nothing happened. Talat was left alone with his thoughts. That was worse than the others. For he managed a spiritual fullness by imagining himself eating their food. Now the physical properties were gone. And his imagination made matters worse.

If only I had a drink, Talat thought. Just a few drops of water. But if I know that devil up there, worse is yet to come. I don't know how long I can stand this. His thoughts wandered to Jendu. Had he arrived at the rendezvous? How long a time had gone by? Maybe he never made it? They should have come to his rescue before this. What was keeping them?

A new succession of monsters appeared on the scene. These were worse than the ones who had come before. The others ate, these did nothing but drink. Talat tore at his clothes in sudden mad frenzy. For the last man, instead of drinking the liquid placed in front of him, had tilted the glass and spilled it to the floor.

TALAT didn't realize he was shouting, screaming imprecations and curses. He knew he was beating at the partition with clenched fists, but to him it seemed as if there were two of him, one helpless in the grip of a mad anger, the other standing off to one side watching with calm disregard. The watcher won out. Talat didn't try to rationalize what happened. He only knew that once more Lathar had been beaten. It no longer made any difference whether the man behind the screen drank the precious water or spilled it out of the glass. Talat was indifferent to the action.

Two others came to the same realization simultaneously, the man who was trying to break Talat by his action, and

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Lathar, still seated in his throne above. Talat wondered in a detached way, whether the king had had any sleep. A great lassitude fell on the tortured man, so that he found it necessary to lie down. He lay flat on his back, empty of mind and spirit. The play was at an end. Not another soul came out to prolong the torture.

Talat's fingers made useless gestures, playing with a piece of fringe on his short robe, caressing his cheeks, feeling the stubble growing there, smoothing down a line of wrinkles which had formed by his lying stretched out, and finally wandering to his belt. He felt something hard, a hilt or handle which protruded from it. He plucked the thing out and looked at it curiously. It was a short, slender-bladed knife, sharp as a razor.

He was not left long in the dark as to why it had been placed there.

Once more the platform sank. Talat waited with a calm, resigned indifference for whatever new torture Lathar had devised. It was not long in coming. Talat did not know that he had proved a vast disappointment to the man above. Lathar had imagined that his prisoner would show more sport. Go mad perhaps, from desire and hunger. Talat did not know that two full days had passed. But Lather knew. And the thought that Talat had escaped, or at least had not broken under the strain, made Lathar more than just angry. It made him feel bored. And boredom was a thing more terrible than anything Lathar ever feared. For he had known power for a long time. Now even the torture of his twin brother no longer gave his twisted, distorted mind any pleasure. There was only the last of the havens for Talat to reach, then death. There wasn't the smallest sign of regret, pity or any other emotion on his face as he lifted his hand in a last signal.

There had always been light—sun, moon, or man-made. But now there was only darkness. Talat had never known such impenetrable black. It was like a curtain behind which he seemed to lie, naked and alone. He struggled erect, his muscles quivering in fear. The darkness was all around him; it was a palpable thing, something to be felt and feared. For certainly it concealed something. And that something held danger to Talat.

A fine, greenish glow came to life at the edges of the platform. And with it came a peculiar odor. Talat sniffed, the hackle rising sharply as he identified the odor. It was that of a toad. Then from the farthest corner of the green glow, twin fires shone. Talat retreated to the farthest point possible away from those twin flames. The fires glowed brighter, more hypnotizing. Talat could not tear his gaze from them. Suddenly he stopped. It wasn't until he stopped that he realized his feet had from some will of their own, been leading him toward those fires. And even as he stopped, the fires began a slow advance toward him.

Talat's hand slipped to the knife and drew it from the belt. Now the toad was plainly to be seen. It stood as high as a man at the shoulders, with a fearsome head, revolting to the sight. Talat had met these reptiles before in their native habitat. But always there had been others with him, and always there had been weapons to fight the beasts. Now he had only a small, thin blade. It would be like the prick of a needle to the toad's thick, green hide that was like armor.

Now the toad was in the center of the platform. Talat saw the short paws of the animal, with the curving razor-edged talons whose power could tear a man to bits at a single blow. And

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those rear legs. They could kick a building apart. The toad advanced slowly. And Talat noticed the leanness of the beast. It was slavering in hunger. Lathar had made certain that the toad would be very hungry before he released it on the human.

TALAT flexed his muscles. It would be a game for a while. The toad was slow, both in reflex and action. But there was no place for the man to escape to and in the end the beast would win out. Suddenly the toad made a quick hop. At the very last possible second Talat ducked. One of the hind legs swept past Talat's head with a swishing sound. The toad skidded across the smooth floor and landed with a dull thud against the far wall. He turned instantly and hopped again. And once more Talat evaded him.

This time the toad lay still, its belly's skin pumping in and out in even rhythm. There was something like a mad grin on the distended jaws. Slowly, the toad started to crawl toward Talat. It was as if Talat could read the beast's mind. He was going to crowd him into the smallest space, then strike. But the platform was too large. And Talat too quick. For no sooner did the toad seem to have Talat cornered, than the man made his escape with a sinewy leap.

How long the contest wore on, Talat didn't know. But suddenly he realized that he was growing tired. His leg muscles no longer responded to his will. His last leap had barely enabled him to escape. He was panting, covered with perspiration. The closed in space reeked with the musk odor of the animal. Talat danced around on his tiring legs. There was something terribly hypnotic about those eyes. Yet he couldn't take his own from them. For he had discovered something about them which had saved his life more than once. They blinked just before the toad made a move. It was a warning which he had to have in order to gain that split second of time.

Once more the eyes blinked and Talat crouched, waiting for the hop. It came and Talat ducked again, running as he did so, for the other end of the platform. But his second step stumbled and Talat's feet shot out from under him. He slid across the floor on his hands. Before he realized what was happening, the toad had turned and was on him. There was a terrible stink in Talat's nostrils. The fearsome head was a foot from his own, the jaws were open revealing twin rows of spike-like teeth set to tear his flesh. There was no escape. Then the head of the toad dashed downward—and Talat threw the knife at it!

One of the lights went out. The toad screamed wildly as the knife plunged deep into an eye, tearing out the sight. The head swivelled from side to side and Talat scrambled erect. But his escape was only temporary. For now the toad had gone mad, either from pain or hunger. It screamed, tearing frightening sounds, and foam-flecked matter appeared at the corners of its mouth. Its body swayed from side to side as it advanced on Talat.

And this time, Talat knew there was no escaping his fate.

ONLY a few feet separated the two. Talat resigned himself to the Gods. The hind legs of the toad drew back. And the glass above burst with the sound of atom-gunfire. A blaze of white light streamed down and struck the top of the toad's head. There was a smell as of lightning striking. And the toad had lost its head.

Talat looked up and saw above him the grinning face of Jendu. A ladder

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unfolded its length until the bottom rung was within his grasp. In a few seconds, Talat was with his friends. The court was empty.

"Quick," Jendu warned. "We can't waste time! They'll be here any second."

Talat tried to run with the rest but his legs made his running a stagger. Strong hands assisted him up the outside flight of stairs. Then he saw it, a slender tube, perched on the very roof of the palace. In a moment he was in it and around him were his own crew. There was a flash of blinding light as the ship took off, then there was only the blackness of interstellar space.

Talat reclined on one of the bunks in the pilot's cabin. Water was brought to him, then food. He ate slowly, relishing each mouthful. Not until he was done, did Jendu tell him what happened.

"The Gods must be with us for sure," Jendu said, his manner jovial. "I tell you, boy, they gave me rough treatment in that jail. Had they known how close to really breaking I was . . . well, that's ended now. But when those volunteers broke into the open, I thought I was done. Because I had told Mota that there was only you and another in the empty jail. Probably the excitement of it all made him forget what I had said. Anyway, it was a simple matter to escape. But it took longer than I thought to get to our own men. I had given Mota wrong directions. But do you know that those men of his had somehow blundered into the right path! I had to get around them and after doing that warn of their approach. That was what took us so long. As it was we barely made it in time."

"Yes," Talat said wearily. "My brother almost had his will with me."

"Your brother, eh? I thought so, when I saw him," Jendu said thoughtfully. "A twin. So that's why you want vengeance."

"Wrong guess, Jendu," Talat said. His voice was stronger, and he sat up as he started to explain. "Lathar is the rightful heir to the throne. Rightful but not proper. He was born a minute before I was. It was enough for succession. But my father was a wise man. There had been twins before in our line and always one of the twins was evil, the other good. Lathar was evil. My father placed me in the care of a wise man who sheltered me, taught me, showed me the manner of rightful living and gave me all my knowledge.

"He died on my twenty-third birthday, four years after my father. Lathar had ruled for those years. I don't have to tell you of his reign, or of the terror he inspired in his mad desire to rule the whole universe. But the council had outlawed the use of the atom except in extreme emergency. And all the implements of war are on that far planet, Mirotl.

"Now do you understand why we have only attacked space liners on the Mirotl line? Haven't you always noticed that those liners always held a full complement of soldiers? Lathar was sending those men to take the atom rays and guns by force. I had to intercept them. And I had to be brutal and savage. Those ships had to be stopped."

"But we did the same thing," Jendu said. "Didn't we raid . . . ?"

"No," Talat said. "We were *given* the guns. I contacted the council long ago and convinced them of Lathar's intentions. There was nothing they could do about the armament he had on his ships. They were granted to him as well as to any other of our planet, both for power and protection. There are pirates, after all, who do prey

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on the commerce lanes."

"I see," Jendu said thoughtfully. "So we really haven't been pirates. All this has been going on with the approval of the council. Had they come into the open, it would have meant interplanetary war. But what do we do now?"

"We must destroy Lathar. Yet I'm afraid. That madman will tear the whole planet wide open before he goes down, if he sees there is no escape."

"And speaking of escape," Jendu said, glancing through one of the ports, "we haven't made our own good, yet."

TALAT followed the other's glance and saw the silvery shape of a slim fighter craft streaking through the heavens after them. Fire streaked from its stern. It would be a matter of seconds before it came into range.

Talat left his couch in a leap for the pilot's seat. The pilot turned a startled look in his direction, then felt himself being lifted bodily from the seat.

"To the guns!" Talat shouted. "Jendu, take the bow. I'll do the chasing now."

Whoever was at the helm of the other ship was more than an expert pilot. He was one of the best Talat had ever known. Lathar must have sent up his best man. So much the better, Talat thought. It will be one ship less to fight. The two ships streaked through the blackness, fiery, miniature comets. Their speed was even. It was in the maneuvering that the battle's end would prove who was victor and vanquished.

Talat knew from long experience that these sky battles did not last long. There was too much speed involved, too much fire power. A single burst from one of the atom guns and it was doom. Split-second timing always decided the battle. He looked through the visiport, watching and trying to anticipate every move of the enemy. There wouldn't be any second guess here.

The gunners were ready for action and the sky blazed with sudden balls of red and orange flame, as the atom charges exploded. Talat measured the speed of the oncoming ship and saw it was just the barest bit slower than his. He could outrun it in the long run. But better, he wanted to make the kill. He slowed down suddenly and watched his gauge. Another ten miles and he would be within range of the other's guns.

"All right, men!" he said tersely. "Hold fire till I give the word."

His hands moved deftly and surely over the instrument panel. He touched a lever here, adjusted a knob there. And all the while his eyes never left the other ship. Suddenly he twirled a knob and the ship literally whirled on its axis and streaked directly for the enemy. And in another instant took another tack at right angles to the other ship.

"Now!" Talat shouted as the ship banked away.

The shots were short.

Talat meant them to be. There had to be the proper reaction from the other pilot, otherwise the whole maneuver would prove their undoing. The other man reacted as Talat expected. Instinctively, the man turned away from the shots, to put distance between them. And in that part of a second, Talat twisted the gleaming tube of metal hard over. He could feel the strain and stress of his sudden maneuver. But though metal groaned and protested the strain, the ship held. It was as fast as lightning striking. Miles separated them when Talat set his last course. Before the other pilot could

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put his ship into safety, Talat was on him. And when he shouted, "Fire!" his men did not miss. The other ship exploded in a single, brilliant burst of flame.

"What now?" Jendu asked excitedly, as he came into the pilot's cabin.

Talat came to an instant's decision.

"Get in touch with the other two ships. If I know Lathar, he's sent every ship in his fleet searching for us. Only our anti-rada shell hides us from them. This one managed to see us. We can't take another chance. I'm going to do the last thing Lathar expects. Attack the palace itself."

A broad grin spread itself across the wide, thin lips of Jendu. Now this was to his liking. Besides, he owed Lathar a little something for the beating he had taken. Jendu liked the idea immensely.

He leaped to the communications room. And even as he left, Talat had set the new course. He looked through the port and saw that the moons were low on the horizon. Night was about to give way to day. They hadn't much time. Everything depended on the speed with which they could manage.

TALAT maneuvered the craft above the narrow shelf of roof. He saw that there was room for but a single ship on the narrow ledge. Slowly and carefully, he brought it to rest. Then he fiddled with a knob, and as he did so, commanded the crew to abandon ship. He was the last out. No sooner had he set foot on the roof top, than the ship took off, seemingly of its own volition. Jendu looked questioningly at him.

"Not enough room up here for all of the ships," Talat explained. "It was the only way to make more room."

Jendu sighed as he watched the ship disappear into the sky. Their means of escape was gone. It was do or die, now.

Talat called one of the crew to him and gave instructions for those who would follow. Then he loosened his atom pistol in its holster and walked to the front of the small group of men awaiting him.

The palace seemed unusually quiet. Talat walked silently down the narrow flight of stairs. Gently his hand twisted at the knob to the king's chamber. The door opened without a sound and he entered the room. His men filed in behind him. There wasn't a soul to be seen. Talat felt a stirring of suspicion. Things were too quiet. Someone should have been there, even if only a courtesan. But the room was empty.

The greyness of the pre-dawn filled the room and gave it a ghostly air. Talat gave low-voiced instructions to some of the men. They scattered about, searching out each nook for a possible ambush. The rest covered their every move. But there wasn't anything to be found.

A sudden burst of gunfire made each man jump. They looked at each other, too startled to do anything but stare. Talat was the first to realize the meaning of the sounds.

"Our ships!" he shouted. "They're being attacked. We led them into an ambush."

There were six sharp explosions as they raced, pell-mell, up the stairs. Powdered dust of atomized masonry settled about their shoulders and the building shook and trembled like a leaf in a high wind. The palace had been hit! But Talat had defined all the sounds. More than the palace had been hit. Two of those sounds had the explosive crackle of metal hulls bursting.

The outer door was burst from its hinges. A scene of utter destruction met their eyes when they reached the

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roof top. Gun ports, concealed from the eye with artistic cunning, showed blackened and burned. The blasted parts of human bodies strewed the narrow ledge. One whole wall of the palace had been obliterated by the atom fire. Talat took in the whole situation in a single glance. Already the sun was above the horizon.

But where was Lathar?

Talat turned and raced back down the stairs. He ran past the chamber door, down until he was at the landing that led into the dungeon. He had suddenly recalled something he had seen as the guards had led him from his prison. There was a door which had been open. Talat knew what was in the room which he had glimpsed as they passed. It was an armory. Rows of atom pistols hung from hooks on the wall.

They were just in time.

The room was full of men. One of them turned at the sound of intruding feet. It was Mota. Talat attacked immediately. His men followed him with wild shrieks of elation in their voices. There was no room for gunfire. A single burst, gone wild would have killed every one in the room, friend and foe alike. It was sword work and not the fancy kind. Man against man, blade against blade, and as it turned out, teeth, fists, and feet played their parts.

TALAT headed straight for Mota. But before he could reach him, two men interposed themselves. Jendu laughed aloud as he parried the thrust of one and slid his own blade along the stub length of the other. The man squealed as the sword point tickled his throat. Then the point stopped tickling and went to work. Jendu was covered with blood as the sword went all the way.

Talat was not so fancy. He chopped down once, and his opponent fell to the floor minus his head. Talat looked about for Mota. The man had disappeared. Another green-shirted man faced Talat. And for the first time Talat knew an equal in sword play. Parry, thrust and recover, the other held his own, and more. Talat had to retreat, so hotly did the other press him. And all the while Talat's mind was on the escaping Mota. There was only one place he could run to and there Lathar would be.

A trick of fate decided their contest. Talat, stepping away from a quick thrust, slipped in a pool of blood. His arm swung upward. He was wide open. But the other, trying to dispatch Talat too quickly, also stepped in the same slimy pool. And Talat's sword, upthrust, tore into the man's throat.

Whirling, Talat made for the door. Hands clutched at him, tore the belt from him, with its holstered pistol. But Talat didn't feel the clutching fingers. Far ahead, he saw Mota make a turn on the stairs. He raced after the fleeing figure. He was twenty feet behind when they reached the chamber door. But he lost a few precious seconds when Mota slammed the door in his face. When he swung it open it was on a strange scene. Lathar and Mota stood face to face. They seemed to be having words. They turned at the sound of the opening door. Talat heard Mota shout, "No!" Then Lathar drew a knife from his girdle and drove it deep into Mota's chest.

Talat paused for an instant as he passed Mota. Something urgent in the other's eyes stayed him.

"Switch . . . Lathar's room . . . quick . . . atom bomb, planet dies . . ."

Talat didn't wait for more. He understood. Lathar had planned the planet's destruction if the day came when

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he was in danger. Talat had to head him off.

Talat burst through the door that led into the immense room that was the king's own. Lathar was half way across it.

"Stop!" Talat called. He knew it was an empty command. His hand had already told him that his belt with its destructive gun was gone.

But Lathar did stop. He stopped and turned. Talat approached. Lathar waited until they were separated by a few yards.

"So it's you again, eh, brother?" Lathar said.

"Yes. And this time I'm on top."

"But not for long."

"Forever, brother. But I can't wait for you. Or rather—"

Of a sudden an atom pistol appeared in Lathar's hand. Talat never knew how his brother missed, even though he tried to dive out of the way. The blast burned the hair on his head. He lifted his head, helpless to stop the madman racing to destroy the planet. And saw Lathar disappear!

Talat walked slowly to the spot into which Lathar had sunk. The opening in the floor! Either Lathar forgot or hadn't thought to have it closed. He lay on the bottom of the shaft, and there was something in the way his neck had been twisted about that told Talat his brother was dead.

"WELL, Talat, what is to be now?" Jendu asked.

Lathar's body had been brought up and placed on the king's bed.

Talat shrugged his shoulders.

"What was it you said? That one of the twins was evil and one good? Well, it seems to me the evil one had his chance. Now I think we ought to try the good."

Talat shrugged his shoulders again. But this time there was a smile on his face.

AMULETS AND TALISMANS

By H. R. STANTON

AMULETS and talismans have been in use since the beginning of time. In the beginning the amulet was used as an object with healing power, while the talisman exercised a magic influence and was thought to possess the power of bringing good fortune and success to whoever would wear it. Both the amulet and the talisman were used by ancient medicine-men, and were quite often formed from parts of the body corresponding to the infected parts of the patient. Among a certain very primitive race of people, the father would rub his new-born child with a fatty substance taken from his own body, and tie the teeth of a ferocious animal about its neck and cover it with the hide of a bull or a tiger. This custom can be attributed to the protective power of teeth and thick hides of certain animals.

Amulets were considered more effective if worn close to the skin. This brought on the custom of tattooing. Symbols of virile animals were drawn on the skin, and in the early days certain organic substances were inserted under the skin during the process of tattooing to make the pattern stand out in relief. In the beginning all marking on the skin had a magic significance. There were symbolic birds which seemed to be flying toward the heart, serpents that appeared to be wrapping themselves about the person, figures, and names of loved ones. Today when we don a necklace, ring, or pearl, we don't think of the magic significance originally attached to the item. The magical powers of amulets account for the large number worn by primitive people on all parts of their bodies to protect each portion from threatened dangers.

In the beginning a person who was visited by good fortune while wearing a certain garment or ornament would tend to give credit to this object, and would henceforth use it daily. It was believed that the power and magic forces in an object could be transferred to another. This led to the wearing of leopard claws, tiger skins, etc.

* * *

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THE CAN OPENER

by Rog Phillips

Empty a can without first puncturing it? Impossible, the psychiatrist said. But of course, he had never seen the *opener* . . .

"GOOD night, fellows," Joe said, pausing at the locker room door. "See you at the office Monday. So long, doc. Going to be at the golf course Sunday?"

Dr. Ronald Spellman nodded.

Joe Carver dipped his head in final farewell and went through the door.

"'See you at the office Monday,'" Bill Carter aped after Joe had gone. "He'll sure be surprised when we all show up tomorrow night!" He tossed his bowling shoes in his locker, chuckling.

"What's up, Bill?" Doc Spellman asked. "You sound like you're planning a surprise party on Joe. Come to think of it, it's his tenth wedding anniversary."

"That's right," Harry Miller answered. "You're a good friend of Joe's. Why don't you come along? It isn't going to be anything much. A couple of cases of canned beer. It's the tin anniversary—tenth. We decided not to make the gifts more than a buck."

"I'd be glad to," Dr. Spellman said.

"O.K.," Bill Carter said. "Only don't make it a pot or a pan. Joe's wife, Mary, has a complete set of that copper bottom stuff. Anything but pots and pans so long as it's tin."

"We'll all meet right here," George Grabe spoke up. "If you get there first, doc, just park and wait. We want to all be there right at seven thirty. Then we'll all go in together."

"Let's see. How many cars'll that be then?" George Grabe said. "There's mine, yours, doc's, Harry's—you're riding with Harry, aren't you, Pete? And Bill, I'll pick you up . . ."

"THE others are here already," Harry Miller said, pulling into the curb.

The two men and their wives got out. An oblong package bulged from Harry's coat pocket. Pete held a similar package in his hand. The others joined them. There was a quick but hushed round of introductions to Dr. Spellman's wife.

"Dr. Spellman's a psychologist—you know, psychoanalyst," Pete Berry whispered to his wife.

"Where's Joe's car?" George Grabe asked, pointing to the empty garage and driveway at the side of the house.

"It would be, too bad if he and his wife were out for the evening," Bill Carter grumbled.

"The lights are on in the house," Dr. Spellman pointed out. "Anyway, I thought of that possibility and called Joe up this morning and asked him if he'd be home this evening. Told him I might be over in this neighborhood this evening on a call and might drop in

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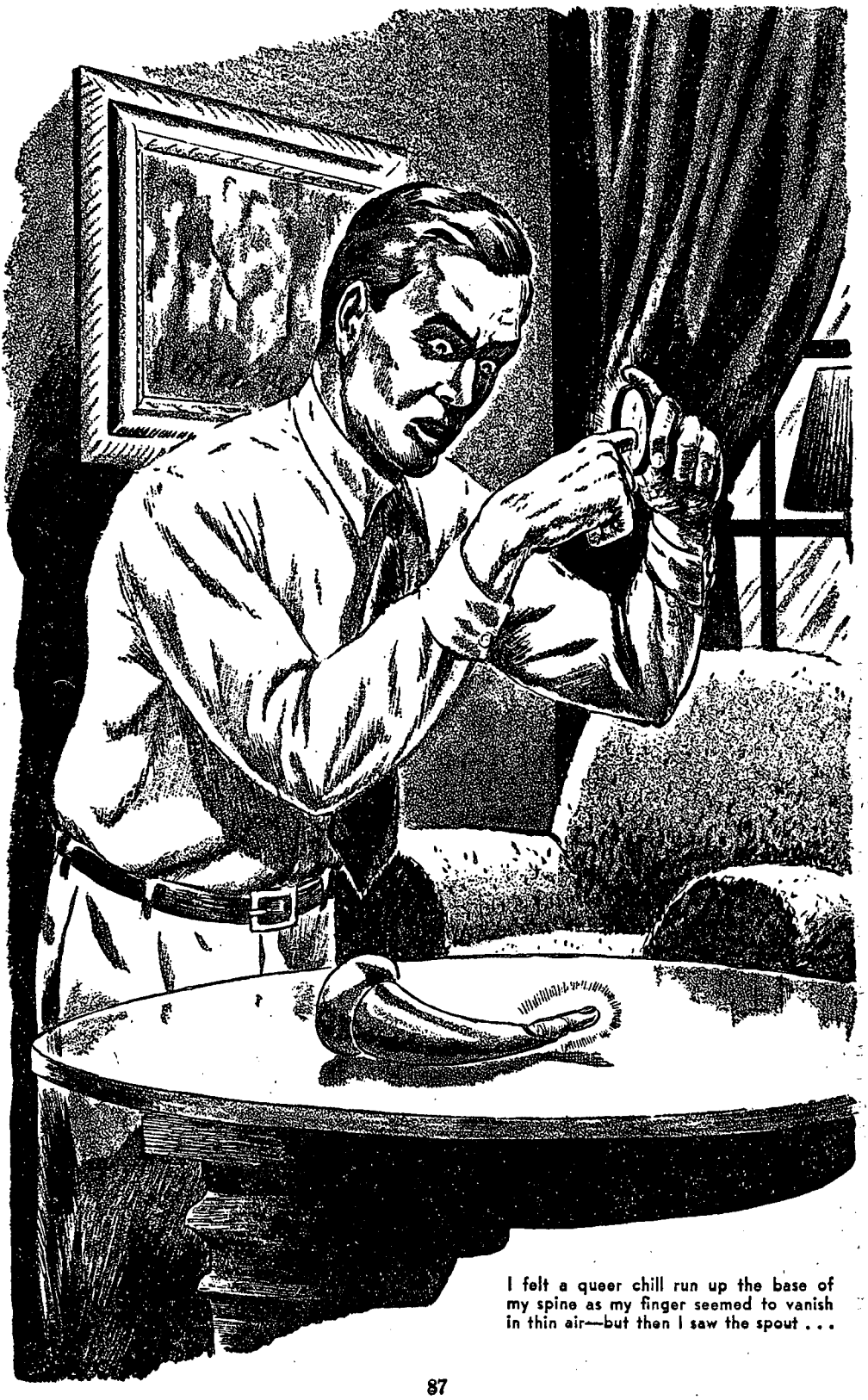

I felt a queer chill run up the base of my spine as my finger seemed to vanish in thin air—but then I saw the spout . . .

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if he'd be here. He said he would."

"Maybe he went down to Howard Street to get a few cans of beer," George suggested. "Say! You didn't forget the beer, did you, Harry?"

"No. It's in the back seat," Harry said. He went to his car and returned with the case of beer.

Dr. Spellman and his wife led the way up the walk and rang the bell. Mrs. Carver opened the door. Her eyes lit up with delighted surprise when she saw all the company.

"Come on in," she invited. "Joe just phoned from downtown. He'll be home in a few minutes. Make yourselves at home and if you'll excuse me I'll dress up a little." She ran up the stairs in confusion.

The women took up the chairs and the men stood around awkwardly, looking for a topic of conversation. Their eyes slowly settled on one another's gift packages.

"What did you get?" Bill Carter whispered to Harry Miller.

"A can opener," Harry whispered loudly enough so that everyone heard him.

"Ohmigosh!" Bill exclaimed. "That's what I got!"

"Me too," came a horrified chorus of male voices.

"Humpf!" came a chorus of disgusted female voices.

"I should have thought to warn all of you," Dr. Spellman groaned, glancing anxiously toward the stairs to make sure Mary Carver wasn't returning yet from changing her dress. "Now it's too late. You'll just have to not give him anything. I brought a new kind of cake tin. I'll take mine back out to the car too, so none of us will be giving presents."

"What's the matter with a half a dozen can openers?" George Grabe objected. "I think that's a good joke—all of us giving him can openers."

Dr. Ronald Spellman shook his head.

"Ordinarily it would be," he admitted. "But not with Joe. He has a phobia against the things. As a matter of fact that's the way I first met him—as a patient. He was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. I'll tell you about it. But first, let's get rid of our presents."

"I'll put them in my car," Harry said quickly. He collected them and slipped out the front door. Less than a minute later he returned. "O.K., let's hear it," he said, out of breath.

"It was about thirteen years ago," Dr. Spellman began. "Joe Carver had an appointment. When he came into the office he was thin and run down. It was obvious that he was nothing but a bundle of nerves. He was confused and fumbling. One of the first things he did when he came into my office was to reach up with his left hand and scratch his head, then look half sore and reach up with his right hand and scratch the right side of his head. Then he looked frustrated and mumbled, 'All right! Go ahead and itch!'

"I immediately started running over the different rest homes in my mind and wondering which one he'd be able to afford. I didn't have much trouble getting him to unburden himself. He was eager to talk about it. This is the story he told . . ."

* * *

IT ALL began about six months ago. A new man started to work at the office. I never could pronounce his name and no one else could either. We called him Slide, which was short for slide rule. That was as close as we could come to it. It was something like Shrdlu—no—Shldrl is more like it.

He had been working there for nearly two weeks before I decided to become friends with him. That delay

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wasn't because he wasn't likeable, because he was. He had already become friendly with everyone including me. Now I decided I would like to cultivate an active friendship with him.

One thing I had observed—he never missed bringing a lunch, and it was always three cans, a large can of tomato juice, a can of peas, and a can of some kind of fruit.

He brought them in a sack and he had some kind of metal spouts he poked into the cans so that he could drain the contents directly into his mouth from the can. He kept those spouts in a drawer in his desk.

It was several days before I realized how impossible that was. I didn't really notice before, because you know how a person only sees what they are used to seeing.

Up until I noticed it I never guessed that I would have been much better off if I had never laid eyes on him. But how could I suspect even when I saw it. He ATE, didn't he? That's what fooled me. He ate, even if it WAS out of tin cans.

I KNOW he ate, because I saw some tomato juice spill out of the spout onto his shirt once. I—I'm SURE I saw it.

When he'd finish his lunch he would toss the cans into his waste basket. The way he'd do it was to pick up the empty can by the spout on it, and give it a flick that would toss the can into the waste basket. Then he'd take the spouts to the washroom and wash them off. After that he'd bring them back and put them in the drawer.

One day I got to wondering what brand of tomato juice he drank. He had gone to the washroom to wash the spouts, so I just lifted the empty can out of the waste basket and read the label.

It was a standard brand, but there was something funny about the can that didn't sink in at first. I turned it over and saw what was wrong. Both lids were smooth and unpunctured!

All three cans were the same, and all three were undoubtedly empty. Their contents had been drained out without poking so much as a pin hole in them!

Impossible? I thought so too. There could only be one rational answer. For some reason Slide was going through the motions of eating without actually doing so, and carrying on the deception by bringing empty cans that were sealed and throwing them away.

Then I remembered a few days before when he had spilled tomato juice on his shirt. THAT hadn't come from an empty can!

I dropped the can back in the waste basket and a strange explanation entered my mind.

A fourth dimension! That was the answer. A sealed tin can was just an open container in the fourth dimension. The spouts acted as tubes in some way, that lifted the contents of the can upward in the fourth dimension, and over the edge, so to speak, dropping them outside the can back in our three dimensional space.

I decided that maybe Slide could be content to merely eat his lunch with them while he worked for wages, but I was built differently. I made up my mind to keep quiet about my discovery and swipe one of those things the first chance I got.

My chance came sooner than I had expected. That very evening at quitting time the boss gave me some extra work that would keep me until quite late. By five thirty I had the office to myself.

With my heart in my mouth I went over to Slide's desk and tried the drawer. It was locked.

Crawling underneath the desk I saw how I could cut away part of the back

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of the center drawer so that the rod that locked the others could be lifted far enough to unlock them. It took a precious half hour of hard work, but at last I pulled on the drawer and it slid open.

My fingers shook as I picked up one of the spouts. Without taking time to examine it there I hid it in my overcoat pocket and closed the door again.

Thievery was a little out of my line and I was afraid that if Slide missed one of his spouts the next day all he would have to do would be to look at me and I would give myself away.

I decided to go out and buy a few cans of stuff and try to figure out how the thing worked. If I could do that maybe I could put it back and then Slide would never know about it until the patented product was on the market.

SCHULTZ'S delicatessen was just around the corner. I went in and bought half a dozen cans of sauerkraut, the cheapest canned food there is. With the heavy sack in my arms I caught the bus and went back to my room.

There, with the door securely locked, I adjusted the spout to the can. The spout was open at both ends. I saw immediately that one end could be brought securely against the top of the can when the band was slipped into place around the top.

The spout itself was only about an inch and a half long. Without tipping the can I stuck a finger in. It never reached the lid! About a quarter of an inch from the lid my finger seemed to twist queerly and disappear. Other than the visual queerness there was no sensation except that of wetness.

I pulled my finger out and it brought a few strings of sauerkraut with it!

Taking the thing off the can without spilling out the sauerkraut, I examined it more thoroughly. Around the end that was supposed to fit against the lid of the can was a strange distorted effect.

I shoved my finger through the spout. When it came out the other end the tip of my finger seemed to jump forward a half inch or less, and where it passed through that strange field it had almost a half inch gap! I could see a cross section of my finger just as plain as if it had been cut off, though no blood dripped from it and it didn't hurt.

It gave me a queer feeling. I slid my finger in and out, trying to figure out what it might be that could push it out of the three dimensions of the ordinary world and back in again.

I finally had to give up. It would take a smarter man than I to figure it out. That meant that if I returned it right away I might never know. Slide might know someone had used it and get suspicious. Of course he would know that if I kept it; but at least I would have one then, and he wouldn't be able to find out I was the one that had it.

Hiding the gadget carefully, I went back to the office and worked until after midnight rounding up the work I should have finished by nine-thirty.

EVERY evening for the following three weeks I experimented with it. I found that when it wasn't attached to the lid of a can it leaked a little. I spent hours carefully pouring water through it from one pitcher to another and seeing its volume slowly grow less as the water vanished to someplace in the fourth dimension.

I was a little worried about Slide. He didn't seem to miss the thing. He didn't even so much as flick an eye when he opened the drawer the next day and found one of his things gone. The day after, he brought another one to replace it so he would have three of

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them again for his lunch.

One day I noticed two fine screws that held the spout onto the ring that fitted around the cans. I stopped at a jeweler's on the way home that following evening and bought a small screwdriver.

In my room I carefully took the spout off the ring. The queer place stayed with the ring. I laid the spout on the table and took the ring to the washstand and ran water into the queer place. It vanished entirely!

That was fun. I held the ring under the tap and turned the water on full. It dropped to the queer field and simply disappeared.

Something wet lapped at my foot. It distracted my attention from the ring. I glanced down. The floor was covered with water.

The horrible truth struck me. Sure enough, when I turned and looked, the water from the tap was running out of the spout! There was gallons of it on the floor that had spilled off the table.

Two hours later when I had mopped it up and gotten rid of the wild tenant in the room below mine, I brought the two pieces of the gadget out of hiding again and stared at them with a sort of horribly dreadful fascination.

Did you ever dread doing something with every atom of your being, yet KNOW you were going to do it? That's the way I felt.

I laid the spout on the table once more, then slowly stuck my finger into the distorted area. Sure enough, the end of my finger crept out of the spout. I wiggled my finger, and five feet away on the table my finger wiggled! It was uncanny!

Suddenly I saw something different. My finger came out of the spout all right, but there was part of it still in the fourth dimension. The reason I noticed this was because there seemed to be a ring of ice around my finger where it disappeared that hadn't felt that way when the ring and the spout were hooked together.

UP TO that point I had been convinced that the secret of the thing was in its shape. Now I began to figure that perhaps it lay in some property of the metal. If that were so, then a chemical analysis of it should give me the whole secret.

I hunted up the janitor of the rooming house and borrowed his tin snips long enough to trim a sliver off the ordinary end of the spout.

It didn't seem to change the operation of the spout any, for which I felt quite relieved.

The next day at noon I took the sliver of metal to a chemist and asked him to analyze it for me. I had to wait two weeks for the report. During that time I played with the gadget every night, learning more things I could do with it.

Finally the day came when the chemist's report would be ready. I stopped in on the way home and picked it up.

"Of course," the chemist said, "you know I can't be too accurate on the percentages with such a small sample. All the elements are there, though."

I glanced it over while he was talking. There was about three percent iron, fifteen percent nickel, seventy-five percent copper, and two percent lead. Those were the metals. The remaining five percent was a mixture of sulphur, carbon and phosphorus.

"Could you make me up a batch of this?" I asked him.

"I could try," he said. "I couldn't guarantee it to be just like the original, though."

"Could you," I hesitated, "could you make me up about ten pounds of it?"

"Sure," he agreed. "It'll cost you about fifty dollars though."

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I wrote him out a check to cover it and the cost of the analysis. When I left he promised to have the ten pounds of the stuff ready by the end of the week.

Saturday I didn't have to work. At nine thirty I was at the chemist's door waiting for him to show up. He didn't show up until almost ten.

"It's all ready, Joe," he greeted me.

Five maddening minutes later he had his coat hung up and the million things done that he felt were more necessary than waiting on me, and brought out a rod of metal half an inch in diameter and two feet long.

"This is one," he said. "How does it look?"

It had exactly the right color. When I touched it I KNEW it would do the trick.

"It looks O.K.," I said casually.

"Fine," he answered. "I'll get the others."

He brought out five more rods and wrapped the six of them up.

"Queer stuff," he commented dryly.

I had to agree with him. When he was wrapping them the paper had behaved strangely. At the ends it had wrapped itself much as thin iron sheets might cling to the poles of a magnet.

As he handed the package to me a crucible dropped to the counter after materializing out of thin air.

"Oh, there's that crucible that I was looking for yesterday," the chemist exclaimed.

I left the shop hurriedly. My last glimpse of that chemist was of him standing with the small crucible in his hand and a thoughtful frown on his face.

There was probably a thoughtful frown on MY face too. I was beginning to see that my surmise had been correct; that the abilities of the "can opener," as I had begun to think of the spout thing, were derived completely from the material it was made from.

The six heavy rods laid side by side were exhibiting the same fourth dimensional effects.

I WALKED down the street toward the bus line carrying the package under my arm. I hadn't gone a block before people started staring at me. One woman shrieked, dropped a sack of groceries she was carrying, and fainted. My first impulse was to stop and help her. There were others with the same idea and I was in a hurry to get to my room, so I didn't stop.

I got to the corner bus stop and waited. The bus came along in a few minutes. The driver saw me and pulled over, getting ready to stop.

Suddenly the driver's eyes took on a glazed, horrified look. He shifted gears with a grinding clash and stepped on the gas, zooming down the street like the hounds of hell were on his heels.

Puzzled by this climax to the peculiar behavior of everyone, I glanced down at my package for the first time since I had left the chemist's. Then I received a shock.

I had cradled the package containing the six rods in the crook of my arm, with my hand hooked into my belt for support. It was still that way, but the center section of the package had disappeared completely. So had the elbow of my arm, leaving a gory stub attached to my shoulder, and a gory forearm casually gripping the belt of my trousers.

It didn't really alarm me. After all, I had spent hours shoving a finger through a small fourth dimension warp. I knew my arm was still whole.

So also was my side, even though a neat section of it seemed to be gone. I could understand now about the woman fainting and the bus driver dashing

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away. But I couldn't just stand there exposed that way.

I bent over and gently upended the package so that one end rested on the sidewalk. Standing away from it I looked down at my arm and side once more. They were whole again. That settled that.

The package was a different problem. It stood there, seeming to be two separate packages, one resting on nothing above the other. It was beginning to percolate in my mind what had probably happened.

The metal was similar to a magnet, only the lines of force and the poles were at right angles to what they would have been in a normal magnet. The lines of force were also at right angles to every direction in the three known dimensions!

That created a strong field in the middle of the bundle of rods, leaving the two ends exposed and seemingly normal.

It had probably taken a few minutes after the six rods were laid together before their molecules clicked into the pattern they were in now.

The field seemed to act on any kind of matter and pulled it into the fourth dimension when it went into the field. That was why my arm and a neat half moon section of my side had disappeared, leaving parts of me so startlingly exposed.

How far out did the field extend? I cautiously approached the package. My knees began to vanish as they came within a foot of it.

I bent over and grasped the bundle by the upper part and tried to lift it. Its ten pounds were too much to hold at arm's length. The package swung in toward my body, exposing half of a beating heart, spongy lungs, and a partially digested breakfast.

Another bus came along and pulled into the curb. I squared my shoulders and decided to brazen things out. The door was open. I picked up the package and darted through the opening.

Fortunately the bus was nearly empty. The driver didn't look around when I stepped in, but merely glanced at the fare box to be sure I paid my fare, and then got the bus into motion.

The few passengers paid no attention to me as I scurried down the aisle to the rear and sat down. If any of them had taken a good look at me they would have no doubt fainted, because I looked at myself and almost did. My midsection had vanished to leave my body almost cut in two except for a shaved-off backbone with exposed nerves.

THE bus sped along. There were few passengers at that time of the morning. People were going downtown rather than out into the residential sections.

I sat there looking out the window and ignoring the hole in the back of the seat ahead, the opening in the side of the bus, and all the other vanished things within the field of the rods.

When we got to the corner where I would get off I rang the bell and waited until the bus stopped before grabbing my package and scurrying off.

Fortunately the driver was thinking of something other than watching me. And fortunately there were no people on the street. I made it to my room almost at a run, slammed the door behind me, and upended the package on the floor.

An idea had been percolating inside my skull that made me shudder. I knew that if I held the thing near my head, my head would go into the fourth dimension. It wouldn't kill me or hurt me, if the vanishing of other parts of my body was any criterion.

I couldn't resist for long. After pac-

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ing up and down and debating it I gave in. I don't know exactly what I expected to see. In a story you might expect the hero to see a green pasture with a gentle cow with three horns grazing peacefully while a beautiful girl is being pursued by five-legged horrors.

Actually, up to a certain point, I saw the same things I had been seeing in the room. Then they sort of blurred and came back into focus in reverse. I lowered the package of rods of that metal until, judging from the position of my arms, my head and shoulders were invisible outside the field.

At that position I couldn't see a thing. Everything was absolutely black. Feeling a little disappointed I lifted the rods slowly as high as I could reach and set them back on the floor upended again. I didn't want to lay them down and have part of the floor vanish so the fellow in the room below would start kicking like he did about the water seeping through the floor.

The experiment had left me a little dizzy. I felt funny in other ways. For one thing, I felt and behaved as if I were clumsy. That's the way I analyzed it at first.

It would be impossible to describe the sensation when I first discovered what was really wrong. I became thirsty. The trip downward to get the metal rods and the excitement and rush on the way home had made me thirsty. I went over to the wash basin and reached up to open the medicine cabinet and get my drinking glass.

Just that. I reached up to open the medicine cabinet. You wouldn't think there could be any possible thing about that to send chills up your spine.

If my hand had been a claw with all the flesh rotted off, if I had suddenly discovered that my hand was gone and there was only a bleeding stub of a wrist, it might have startled me; but it wouldn't have sent those chills up my spine. And yet what happened is quite simple to state.

In my mind I gave the order for my right hand to raise the knob of the cabinet door. My left hand was the one that came up at the command.

That's all that happened. That's all that happened THEN. Yet, its happening was the first conscious realization I had of what had taken place when I stuck my head in that field.

BEFORE the day was over I had explored the full, devastating consequences of that rash act. I proved that my head had switched about in some unimaginable way so that right was left and left was right.

My right hand had the clumsiness that had normally belonged to my left hand, and my left hand had the skill that had belonged to my right, except that my right arm was less clumsy than my left had been, and my left was less skillful than my right had been.

Writing was impossible. The only way I could write proficiently was with my left hand, and writing backwards. It was readable in the mirror.

I put my head back in the field several times in an effort to make the switch back to normal. No results. Some fiendish chance had interchanged the parts of my head that first time.

Without trying, I knew what it had done to my typing skill. Anyone who has learned to type knows how hard it would be for me to have forgotten my old reflexes and to learn to type all over again.

Unable to type or to write longhand, there was no use in going to work Monday.

I glared at the package of rods, blaming it for my trouble. Then I noticed something. The visible ends of the

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package were growing shorter slowly. When I had upended the package on the sidewalk there had been six inches of each end clearly visible. Now there was less than two inches!

The logical thing to do occurred to me. Separate the six rods. Unfortunately the chemist had tied the package with strong twine in the middle. The middle was undoubtedly still some place but there was no way to get at it to cut the twine. I tried every way, but couldn't break even one rod loose from the others.

I'll never forget the terrible hours of that Saturday night as I sat watching those visible ends melt slowly into nothingness.

Somewhere around midnight they quietly melted away. For several minutes there was nothing visible, but there was a feeling of something still there. Then a hole appeared for a second in the floor, and filled back again.

I knew what was happening. The rods were falling to the center of the Earth! I could visualize them shoving the matter that entered the field to one side into the fourth dimension. That was what had to be happening because two objects can't occupy the same space at the same time.

Over Sunday I gradually realized to the full what my desire to make a better can opener had brought me to.

That can opener? It had disappeared. I'll always believe that in the proximity of the larger field the small field of the thing had grown stronger, and it too went completely into the fourth dimension and sank into the Earth.

Monday morning I called the office and told them I wouldn't be down for several days. I planned to go back to the chemist and have him make another ten pounds of the stuff.

I didn't even make the trip down after reading the morning papers. They told the story of what had happened to him and I could guess what had really happened.

His wife reported him missing. She and the police had gone to his shop. The doors to his lab were bolted on the inside. His hat and coat were hanging on a coat hanger. There was no trace of him. He had "vanished from the face of the Earth." Those were the very words the newspaper used.

It was Wednesday before I got up enough courage to get hold of Slide and confess all and ask him to get me out of my predicament. I called the office. One of the fellows answered Slide's phone.

"Didn't you know?" he said. "Slide quit Saturday. He gave notice early last week. Didn't say where he was going, either."

I got his address from the employment office of the company and called that number. His landlady told me he had moved out without leaving any forwarding address. I advertised for him in all the papers. No results.

I was stuck. Absolutely stuck. I couldn't earn a living unless I could write and use a typewriter. I called up the office again and talked the boss into giving me a three weeks' leave of absence. In that three weeks I found out that I was going to have a tougher time learning to write and type all over again than I had had in the first place because there were too many deeply ingrained, mixed up things to unlearn.

At the end of the three weeks' leave of absence I had to call up and quit my job. That was two months ago.

* * *

"THAT was his story and he stuck to it," Dr. Spellman said, lifting his eyebrows and spreading his hands. "I sat him down at a typewriter and asked him to type something. He started to

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type and nothing but nonsense came out.

"He didn't have much money saved up, but it happened that there was a rest home out in the suburbs that needed a janitor and hadn't been able to keep one more than a month at a time. He took the job and stayed there, working as janitor and following my instructions.

"In two years he was as good as ever. I never was able to rid him of his phobia against can openers though. Just the sight of one upsets him."

The doctor shook his head sadly. "I hate to think what would have happened if he had gotten six of them all at once tonight."

"Do—do you think that story he told was true?" Harry Miller's wife asked timidly.

"True?" Dr. Spellman laughed uncomfortably. "He was convinced it had all happened. But of course it was all in his mind."

The sound of a door closing came down the stairs. It was followed in a moment by Mary Carver.

"Hasn't Joe come yet?" she asked. "I wonder what could be keeping him?"

"He didn't know we were going to be here," George Grabe said. "He might have run into somebody he knew and stopped to chew the fat for awhile."

"Well why don't you open some of your beer?" Mary suggested. "I'll get an opener and some glasses from the kitchen."

"Let me help you, Mary," Mrs. Miller said, rising quickly.

The sound of footsteps on the front porch made them pause at the kitchen door. A key clicked noisily in the lock. The front door swung open.

Joe Carver appeared briefly, smiled, and disappeared again as another man stepped through the door. Joe came in after him and closed the door.

"Well well, well well," he said. "This IS a surprise. Mary, I want you to meet an old friend of mine, Chuck. Chuck, this is my wife, Mary. We're going into business together Mary."

"Glad to know you, Chuck," Mary said. "If you'll excuse me a moment, I was just going to get some glasses for the beer."

"Wait a bit, Mary," Joe said. "I've got a big surprise for you. This is our tenth wedding anniversary — remember? But first—Chuck, this is Bill Carter, and Mrs. Carter . . ." The introductions went quickly.

"And now—" Joe looked around, then started for the kitchen. "Be back in a second," he tossed over his shoulder. He came back with a tray of glasses and passed them around, insisting that each person take one.

"Anyone got a can opener?" he asked.

There was a stunned silence.

"Never mind," he said.

With a deft motion he plucked a can of beer out of the case setting on the table. With another deft motion he plucked something out of his coat pocket.

"The very latest can opener," he said. "Chuck Schordulski and I just formed a partnership to manufacture them."

He attached it to the beer can swiftly and poured the contents of the can into Dr. Spellman's glass. Then with a swift motion he loosened the can opener and held it up so that everyone could see it.

"Simple little gadget," he said. "But look at THIS!"

He held up the can and twisted it around to show it at all angles, then tossed it to Dr. Spellman.

"Look, doc," he exclaimed triumphantly. "NO HOLES!"

THE END

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SAVAGE DECORATIONS

By Sandy Miller

LONG, long ago the warriors in some savage tribes in Africa were accustomed to filing their teeth, to add to their efficiency in battle. Front teeth filed to long, sharp points gave them a ferocious, fanged appearance like the wolf or fox. When his weapons were exhausted in combat, or when caught with none at hand, the savage had always his teeth, and could spring at his opponent's throat, fighting "tooth and nail." When iron-tipped weapons came into use, the primitive practice of fighting with sharpened teeth died out; however, the custom of filing the teeth survived for a long time as a mark of distinction, and a form of decoration among the savages.

Skulls of children of chiefs were molded by some African savage tribes. This practice has been experimented with by peoples throughout the world, at different periods of antiquity, sometimes for the express purpose of affecting intelligence. Primitive Africans did it for decorative purposes. When important children were very young, string was wound around their heads, and gradually tightened until the skulls were compressed and lengthened. Treated thus throughout childhood, the heads took on the appearance of elongated eggs. The goal was the highest possible headdress in adulthood. To the long, tall heads were added long, tall headgears. Hair was drawn to the top of the head and tied there. Hats made of plaited grasses were fastened to the hair with ivory pins. To the top of the hats were added bunches of long feathers. The total effect, to one not accustomed to such sights, must have been extremely startling and fantastic.

* * *

"The Bitter Cold . . ."

By Frances Yerxa

REMEMBER those immortal lines of Robert Service's poem which go, ". . . Have you ever been out in the Arctic cold when it's sixty-nine below? And the iceworms wriggle their purple heads through the crust of the pale blue snow." Well those lines offer a good starter for the consideration of a hoary old legend that has been debunked a hundred times and yet still finds its way into the pages of science fiction.

"The bitter cold of interplanetary space . . ." Bunk! Interplanetary space is not cold for the simple reason that sheer *nothingness* can't have a temperature! Temperature as science defines it, is a measure of the average statistical motion of the molecules or atoms of a substance. Heat is *the* motion of those molecules. On an arbitrary scale we have assigned such motion a measure —its temperature.

When it is said that the temperature of boiling water is one hundred degrees centigrade or two hundred and twelve degrees Fahrenheit, what is meant is that the molecules of water are in rapid motion due to the energy imparted to them, and on our arbitrary scales, this temperature is one hundred or two hundred and twelve. It is generally understood that the point where no molecular motion at all is involved, is *minus* two hundred and seventy three degrees centigrade.

As far as we know it, space is an almost perfect vacuum. No matter permeates it. Therefore it is impossible to speak of space as having a temperature, or of being hot or cold. It is, in a word, meaningless. If an object were located in space it would radiate its heat in the form of infra-red radiations until all of it had been dissipated, but contrary to popular belief this would take time, very likely a matter of hours depending on the size of the object, its original temperature, and its surface, the nature of which is quite a determining factor.

At the same time if the object were in the solar system and not too remote from the Sun, it would be absorbing heat, at a rate like its dissipation, dependent upon the factors mentioned above. Consequently a balance would eventually be struck where the object gained as much heat as it lost—possibly.

It can be seen, therefore, that temperature in space refers only to objects, not to space itself. You don't have a temperature and the heat that that word implies when you don't have anything for it to exist in.

We said before that absolute zero, minus two hundred and seventy three degrees centigrade is the temperature at which no molecular motion ensues. Theoretically this temperature has never been attained but it has been closely approached in the laboratory. Scientists have gotten to within a few hundredths of a degree of it. While the energy extraction that cooling represents works effectively on a large scale, we still are not sure what exactly happens at absolute zero. Modern quantum theory and wave mechanics show that energy is compounded of discrete and definite bundles, the "quanta." And since all molecular motion is of a completely random nature, purely statistical, even at absolute zero, some molecules will be in motion.

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Benton looked up to find the girl examining a curious fragment from the floor

THE brilliant Arizona sun beat down with full intensity. I straightened up from tightening the nut on a four-inch pipe flange, dropped the heavy spanner and started to wipe the sweat that beaded my forehead. The soft desert wind swept across everything and everybody, like a breath from a hellish blast-furnace. But in spite of the physical discomfort, I could smile. I had every reason to be happy.

Three hundred feet away from the Administration shack, the slim needle of stainless steel that was the *Luna,* our first spacial-rocket, stood poised in its cradle, like an Egyptian obelisk. The long shadow that it cast made the resemblance even more startling. It was the most inspiring sight that could be imagined.

"Jim!" My name came from the lovely lips of Dr. Henderson's daughter. She

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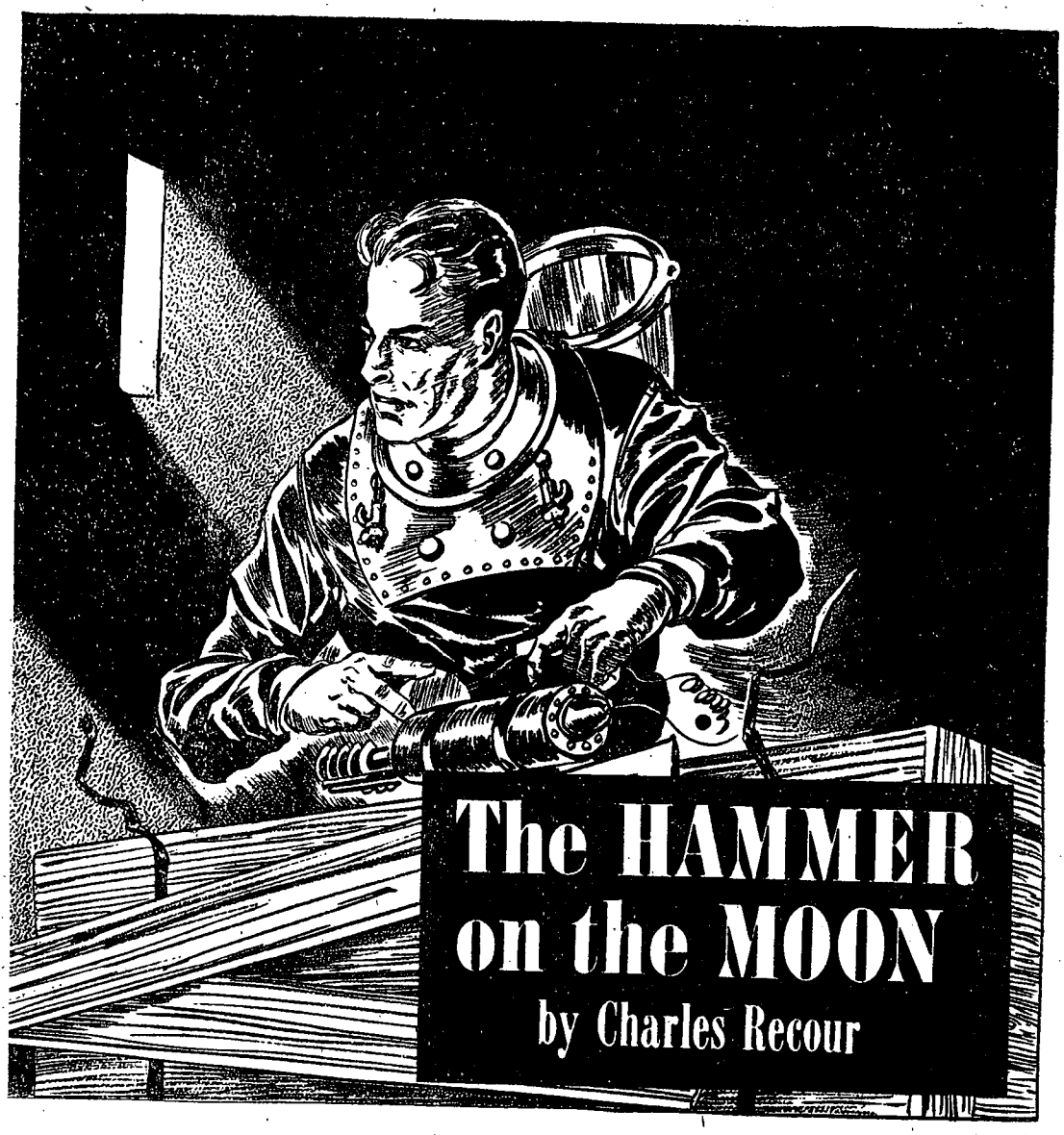

The HAMMER on the MOON

by Charles Recour

Jim Benton knew that something had happened to the rocket ship on its maiden voyage to the Moon—but *what*? . . .

came across the sand toward me and my eyes swung from the rocket to her. She wore dirty, oil-stained coveralls, and her long brunette hair was masked by a bandanna. But these things failed to conceal the complete and beautiful femininity of her.

"Jim," she said as she came up to me, "Dad says that it won't be long now. Maybe tomorrow. Aren't you happy?"

I slipped an arm about her slim waist. Her head came up to my shoulder.

"I'm happy, Peggy" I said, "but not for the same reasons. I'm thinking of

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you. I love you, darling." My voice dropped. I couldn't look at her without practically worshipping her.

For a moment her laughing face became serious. "Me too, sweetheart," she said. Then her features twisted into a delightful grin:

"I think I've got a terrific rival in that. Are you sure you don't love steel and electricity more than me?"

"Peggy, if that beautiful hunk of metal was made of platinum-plated rhodium studded with diamonds, I'd still prefer Dr. Henderson's lovely irresponsible daughter. It's a beauty though—I have to admit that."

"That's what I mean," she said mischievously, "you're never sure. If that old rocket could talk, Jim, I'd believe you'd make love to it."

"Don't worry about it. You humans still have advantages," I cracked back. Then seriously I said:

"Just look at it, Peggy. Do you realize what this represents? How long have we worked for it and thought about it? It seems like an eternity and now that it's finished I can't believe it myself."

We suddenly both became silent, as we watched workmen swarming over the vessel giving it the finishing touches. It must have been painful working near that hot, gleaming metal, but no one minded. It represented too much. As I stood with my arm around Peggy, I couldn't help but muse on the origin of that tribute to brains and skill and a big dream.

Eight years is a long time. But I don't think I'll ever forget that long ago afternoon at school. It was one of those long, lazy, dreamy afternoons. The University campus was quiet with only a few people moving on it. It was the type of afternoon when you'd expect to walk into a classroom or a laboratory and find the class asleep under the slow drone of the Professor's voice. But it wasn't that way in Advanced Mechanics II. The classroom was quiet, but there wasn't a nodding head in the room. In my mind's ear I can still hear Dr. Henderson's voice:

". . . and so, gentlemen, the problem of rocket flight into interplanetary space in our time is really a very simple one. We shall not achieve it until we find more suitable fuels. As you can see by the charts and the equations on the blackboard, the governing factor is the discovery or invention of a rocket fuel whose exhaust velocity is considerably higher than anything we have now, including the alcohol-oxygen combinations as well as the various fuels used in the German V-2's."

It wasn't those words that startled us or kept us particularly interested. We had known all those things from the preceding classes of mechanics. We were all graduate students and because my specialty was nuclear physics in which I was going to get my master's at the time, I suppose I wouldn't have bothered taking the course in Advanced Mechanics II, if I hadn't been dating Peggy, Professor Henderson's daughter. I had met her casually at a dance, found her so intelligent and intriguing as well as beautiful, that before long I was going steady with her. Often I promised her my Phi Beta Kappa key.

WHEN I met her father at the time, he wasn't much different than now—only a little less gray. He was a distinguished but gaunt looking man, a man to whom work was real pleasure. One evening when I called for Peggy who had evidently told him a good deal about my love for nuclear and atomic physics, he got me into a conversation, and I found that that was his field also. During the war he had worked with the Government on the Bomb.

He was really filling in on the Ad-

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vanced Mechanics course for a friend of his who was ill. Dr. Henderson suggested that if I had any free time, I would find it to my interest to join the class. It was a late afternoon class and so I enrolled. I never regretted that move, not only because the lecturer was Peggy's Dad, but because it changed the course of my life. It was "to my interest" all right.

The words of that afternoon's lecture still drone through my skull: ". . . fuel then is the limiting factor in our desire to leave this planet. We must look for a liquid or gaseous fuel whose exhaust velocity is high enough to enable us to do enough work to overcome gravity and still have adequate amounts for maneuverability. It must be a compact and easily handled fuel. Other experimenters have thought of atomic hydrogen which would fill the bill, except that it is too dangerous to work with easily and safely. Gentlemen, I think I have the answer. It will probably surprise you, but on reflection I think you'll agree that I am right.

"I'm going to use either lead or mercury." He smiled. "Yes, molten lead *is* a liquid. So is mercury. We'll hurl these atoms through our rocket tubes in the form of gases of course. They have great mass which is desirable. They are easily and safely handled. They are compact. But from the looks on your faces I can see that you're wondering what I'm talking about. Where and how do we make lead into a gas with a high escape velocity? That's the question running through your minds, eh? It's really simpler than you think. All we have to do, is to heat the metal to extremely high temperatures and we have a rocket chamber full of the nicest high-exhaust velocity fuel that you ever saw."

His words were a surprise. The class was stunned for the moment. But glimpses of understanding were already on most our faces. He went on:

"Now, I'm going to ask you a question. How are we—or am I—going to heat lead into a gaseous vapor of extremely high temperature without having a fuel problem? There would be no advantage if there is such a problem. It would be just a case of transferring the fuel problem from the rocket chamber, the combustion chamber, to the lead-heating chamber? What's the answer?"

Before he could say another word, I had shot out with a succinct and correct answer:

"An atomic pile!"

"Yes, Mr. Benton, that is correct."

The class broke up in a hub-bub of small conversation. Of course the solution to rocket flight was obvious. Use an atomic pile to create your energy source, to serve as a source of heat energy and you could use almost anything in the rocket combustion chambers that could be converted to a gas by heat. Old shoes, milk bottles—you name it. The idea was astounding.

The Professor had continued, "When classes close for the summer, I'm going to supervise this project. If any of you feel that you are interested in working with me, we'll see what can be done. It is going to be a long and tedious project—but interesting. Talk to me in my office tomorrow. Class dismissed."

That night I had gone over to Peggy's, but I must confess that my mind hadn't been on her as much as it had been on the rocket. Her Dad hadn't been in that night and Peggy sensed my detachment during the evening. Finally she had drawn it out of me, and much to my surprise thought that it would be a wonderful idea if I were to join her father in his work.

"You big lug!" I came back to the present. Peggy was giving me the elbow in the side. "You're squeezing me so

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tightly, I can't breathe. Do you want to crush me? Where's your mind? You act as if you're in a daze."

"I'm sorry dear," I said, "my mind was out of our time. I was thinking about the start of this. It was a lucky day for me—for us." I pressed her to me again.

"Yes, Jim," she said, her lovely face sweat-stained and still beautiful, "I couldn't be happier. Here comes Dad."

DR. HENDERSON, preoccupied and a little grayer now than eight years ago, shuffled his tall slim bulk toward us. He held a sheaf of papers in his hands. They were official communications from Washington.

"Jim," he said, "these are the okays. The three of us have permission and authority to officially claim the Moon when we land there." He flipped the papers away. "So much red tape," he said mockingly.

I passed cigarettes to Peggy and Dr. Henderson, and the three of us stood in the shadow of the stainless steel obelisk and marveled for a moment that all this had come to pass. I looked around at the crude buildings, with everything designed for function and utility, not looks. Nor did the guards and the steel fence escape me. It was known that other nations, more specifically the Soviet Union, was as interested as we in interplanetary flight. Hence the need for precautions like those. And I still remembered Koneff and Glieskow, the two Russian exchange students at the University. They had been in class the day Dr. Henderson had lectured. We never did learn what they were doing, but from the way their faces had lighted up during the lecture and from what they had said afterward, it was a good bet that they were doing much the same thing for their country as we were doing for ours.

The rocket-area was a beehive of activity as workmen swarmed everywhere, cleaning up loose ends. The *Luna* was as complete as human beings could make her and no end of money and engineering skill had been spared in constructing her. I had my doctorate in nuclear physics and I had personally installed the highly efficient Uranium pile that provided the basic heat source for vaporizing our fuel—mercury. In an emergency we could use almost anything, but a good deal of the bulk of the rocket was mercury metal, a liquid which could be handled so easily.

Special alloys had been developed as well as special ceramics for the combustion tubes. They had to be, for they were going to operate at inconceivably great temperatures. This had to be, in order to give the mercury atoms a sufficiently high exhaust velocity.

Dr. Henderson, Peggy Henderson and myself were to take the first trip to the moon, primarily because the *Luna* was basically our design, although the actual construction was done with the aid of government funds and engineers. It had been too costly a project to be taken over by anything but such a huge organization. We spent about eighty million dollars on the project, as nearly as we could estimate.

And all three of us were eminently qualified for the job. Dr. Henderson was, basically, the Brains of our group. I was a specialist in nuclear physics and Peggy was a thoroughly grounded electronics engineer. Most of the radio and radar equipment in the *Luna* was of her design. Peggy was not only beautiful—she was smart!

There would be no test run of the *Luna*. Liquid fuel rockets of conventional design and of the same size had been flown successfully before. In addition Peggy and I had built and assembled small models, radio-controlled,

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which had worked perfectly. The main worry that had concerned us—the atomic pile, mercury-fuel system—had worked perfectly in these test jobs. Also we had built a small stub-winged plane using such a rocket power plant and it had functioned just as our design had predicted. We were as certain of the *Luna* as we were of anything. There was no question about what it could do.

Dr. Henderson, Peggy and I went back to the mess hall and had lunch. We spent the rest of the day in supervising the clearing of the ship. The *Luna* was a hundred and seven feet long and twenty-eight feet in diameter at its widest part. It was constructed of a special stainless-steel alloy with stressed-skin construction that gave it great strength and rigidity. It could stand any stress that we were likely to give it. It was a smooth sleek steel cigar, its lovely lines disturbed only by the tripodlike stern rocket tubes. This was because the craft was intended to be landed and supported on its stern jets. It was impossible to do anything else in light of the rough surface of the moon which we expected to encounter. Yet, should the craft by chance be tipped on its side, we firmly believed that it would have strength enough to stand launching from that position. Every safety device and control that engineers could think of had been incorporated in it.

THE day went by with all of us feeling the mounting tension. It would be hard to sleep at night. There was so much on our minds. And it was not all of a technological nature. In fact that was the least of it.

Dr. Kingston of the Bureau of Standards, who had acted as coordinator of the project and who had given us a completely free rein in the whole affair, spent a good deal of the time with us, briefing us with the latest observations and checking on our navigational—astrogational—equipment.

He was a pleasant fellow. His prime concern was not for us or for the rocket. He was more worried about the security regulations. It was known that the Soviet Union was more than casually interested in the project. What made it of prime concern to that nation was the fact that, already on the way at different fabrication points all over the country, were exact duplicates of the *Luna,* as many as a hundred it was rumored. Consequently the country was honey-combed with Soviet agents, whose minds were on one thing—American rockets. The method of propulsion was no secret but there were many intricate aspects of it that required a great deal of knowledge and research. This existed, so far as we knew, only in American vaults under the heaviest of guards.

The men who had built the *Luna* and who had worked with us, had been carefully screened and subjected to the most rigorous of scrutinies, but there was always the possibility that agents could slip through, regardless.

Hence, it was agreed that just before the *Luna* was to take off the next morning the three of us would, personally, and in lavish detail, go over the ship with a fine tooth comb, in order to make certain that nothing had been tampered with.

That night, Peggy and I left the headquarters building for a walk and a breath of cool air. The Arizona desert may be hot during the day, but the nights are exceedingly cool. It was a beautiful sight, the *Luna,* outlined by the intense searchlight beams. It gleamed and glistened, its nose pointed heavenward, a symbol of Man's perpetual reaching for the stars.

"Darling," I said as we strolled through the maze of guards, my arm around Peggy, "don't you feel the thrill

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of this thing? Isn't it almost the culmination of our lives?"

She looked up at me, now so completely feminine in evening gown—required by the farewell dinner—that my heart melted. Her deep brown eyes held a spell a thousand times more potent and mysterious than anything thought of by Man's brain.

"No, Jim," she answered softly, "this isn't the culmination—it's only the beginning."

We were quiet after that as we walked among the massive machines that had helped shape the monster before us. Very often we were challenged by the alerted guards who, above all, were prepared for anything now. But a glimpse of our faces and the badges that we wore was enough.

If Peggy and I had been dressed we would have gone into the *Luna,* but we would get plenty of the ship tomorrow, so why bother we thought. We stood at the base of this tribute to Dr. Henderson's genius, and we could almost feel each other's thoughts.

They were a mixture of pride and awe —the natural reaction of people who have been intimately concerned with a great all-consuming, driving project into which they've put their greatest energies, their thoughts and their hopes. This was the realization of a dream greater than both of us and we had a calm pride in knowing that we had helped bring it about.

The awe that enveloped us came from just the consideration of that magnificent tribute to human skill, a sculpture in stainless steel and electrical cable, greater than any sculpture that man had hitherto attempted.

The chill night air became uncomfortable after a time.

"Let's go back, Jim. I feel tired. And you know we're not going to get a lot of sleep from now on."

"Certainly, Peggy. I'm fagged myself. But I feel good. I've got you, darling—and that."

"And I'll bet you think more of that, than you do of me," Peggy said, with that eternal feminine jealousy of things material that fasten themselves in the soul of a man a woman loves.

"Not in a billion years," I answered and I stopped any further discussion with a kiss. She clung to me fiercely and I held her closely. Tomorrow we were going on Man's supreme adventure. Who knows what could happen. I brushed the thoughts from my mind.

WE WALKED back to the administration buildings. After I had taken her in I came back out for just one more look. The stately projectile looked as grimly beautiful as before and it seemed to have an air about it as if to say: "All right, you pitiful little humans —ride me! And you'll know the thrill of the spaceways. You may have designed me, you may have built me, but *I* still have the last word. Just wait . . ."

I stopped the fanciful rumoring. Dr. Henderson met me and we had a farewell toast to the encampments. We talked over the possibilities of the dangers of the trip which we both tended to dismiss as vague fears.

I slept, oddly enough, very soundly that night . . .

THE NEXT day turned out to be a haze of whirlwind impressions. There wasn't a great deal to do except to make recordings of the take-off. Everything within the ship had been readied for us. But there were the usual publicity angles to be considered. The three of us, Dr. Henderson, Peggy and myself, made the usual pompous statements. Toward mid-day this broke off, the compound was cleared of all but the essential workers, who were making last minute checks on various bits of equipment

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and mechanisms and who were giving the ship the final once-over.

I looked at my watch. In an hour after meal-time we would be in the ship and take-off time would be entirely up to us. Because the ship need not be sent in a specially calculated trajectory in order to conserve fuel, there was no necessity to start at a specific time. Actually there was sufficient fuel to take us to Mars and back if we so chose. But we had settled on making the trip definitely to the Moon and back before we tried anything else.

After the luncheon for the three of us with a few government scientists and technicians, we prepared to board the silvery streak that was the Luna. There was nothing very elaborate about this. We had no personal belongings to consider. Everything, from clothes to food, was aboard the rocket.

We walked, the three of us, nonchalantly toward the base of the *Luna*. An entry port with a long tube leading to the forward part had been built in the base. Because the rocket at rest would be standing on its tripod tubes, and be cause the inner tube served as a passage to the "engine room," the place where the atomic pile and the mercury lines were located, this arrangement was necessary. Under operation, however, it was expected that we need never go near the pile or its massive shielding.

The head of the Bureau of Standards shook hands with each of us:

"I wish, as does every man and woman on this base, that I was going with you, but it's your baby. It really belongs to the three of you. Good luck from all of us." He turned to Dr. Henderson.

"As chief of the expedition, I want to caution you to give us at least an hour to clear the base. You never know . . . not that anything will happen but . . ."

"Don't worry," Peggy's Dad said, "we'll wait for complete and official release. We're going to be in radio contact at all times you know. And I think the televisors that Peggy built will serve too."

"Just one other thing—check everything yourselves—once more. We've tried to make everything fool-proof and we don't think anything has been changed or damaged since the last check, but you never know. According to our secret service, this trip is considered the hottest thing that the Soviets can think about. And they're very interested. Play it safe."

"We will," Dr. Henderson and myself answered simultaneously.

"Again good-bye and good-luck."

The three of us turned away and Peggy led the way into the *Luna*. She and Dr. Henderson climbed the steel rungs—in space and on the moon, gravity would be no problem—while I turned to the port as soon as I was inside and proceeded to lock it. It was thoroughly sealed by the neoprene gasket and the sturdy submarine-type locks. There was another door of course, forming the air-lock as well as the door at the top of the tube into the control cabin. This gave us a triple-doored lock which, in conjunction with the automatic safety devices, protected us against any chance of leaving them open.

With the doors sealed the three of us found ourselves in the control cabin. The floor was at right angles to the axis of the ship. Numerous quartzite ports enabled us to view space directly, but in addition we had views in all directions because of large numbers of television iconoscopes located at strategic places.

THERE were acceleration seats but these were more for emergency use than anything else because the *Luna* could travel as slowly or as rapidly as desired and at no time did we anticipate using great accelerations.

"Well," said Dr. Henderson, "let's get

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to work. Peggy, you start right away on the electrical inspection. I'm going to check the controls and Jim, you go down to the pile and keep in touch with me—both of you—through the intercom. When everything is checked come up here and we'll coordinate our findings. Frankly I don't think anything will be wrong, but you never know. So make a good job of it."

"Aye, aye, sir," Peggy retorted and smiled. Immediately she went to the room right beneath the control cabin where all electrical equipment and cables were centered.

"I'll give everything a thorough going-over," I said and back down the entry tube I went. Everything that I examined in the instrument-crammed space of the atomic-pile room was in order. I missed nothing, though. Outside, I could hear the sounds of men carefully examining the base of the ship and no doubt thoroughly checking the tubes themselves, from which would soon issue intensely hot, lethal blasts of mercury vapor—unlike any other mercury vapor that had ever been generated.

As soon as my inspection was over, I returned to the control room and reported my findings to Dr. Henderson. He too was satisfied. Peggy joined us a little while later and her report was the same. Everything was in perfect shape. Close to an hour had elapsed and Dr. Henderson called the base over the radio, checking it and the television sets. All was in order. We would be in constant communication with the base from the instant we left it to the time when we returned.

The base reported to Dr. Henderson that everything was clear and ready, and that at his discretion, he could take off.

I went over to the control panel, and with Peggy and Dr. Henderson flanking me, sat in the comfortable seats. I had studied the maze of gauges and dials before me and I knew exactly how to handle this craft even though I hadn't handled it before. I had sufficient experience with the smaller models of the ship, so that I had no fear of handling this. All the bugs had been reduced to a minimum anyway. Actually Peggy could have handled it or Dr. Henderson, but there was just the chance that it would be advisable to have a young man's quick reactions at the throttle.

"All right, Jim," Dr. Henderson said slowly but calmly, "if you're ready," he smiled, "give it the gun!"

I turned to Peggy. "Okay, darling?"

"Right!" she came back.

I gently fed power to the *Luna*. I shuddered delicately, there was a hissing whine, a feeling of gentle acceleration and the *Luna* was aloft! The whole thing seemed anti-climactic. There was no difficulty whatsoever. We were rising rapidly as the screens before us showed and from the loudspeaker overhead we could hear the voice of the operator at the base:

" . . . *Luna*, you are air-borne. You are rising perfectly." The Bureau head's voice cut in as he must have grabbed the mike — " . . . it's perfect, Dr. Henderson. Did you notice anything unusual?"

"Not a thing. Everything is under control. We're going to recheck now. Call us back if anything of importance occurs." Dr. Henderson put down the microphone.

I set the auto-pilot, a complex mechanism of electrical equipment, gyros and gears and cams. It held the ship perfectly steady. We knew that our automatic radio equipment was pouring meteorological data down to the receivers on Earth.

From now on there was nothing to do. Once we were free to relax from the thoughts of the take-off and the myriad of minor duties that consumed the

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time of each of us, we were able to appreciate our position. At last we were out in space, a desire that had consumed human beings from the time that they had been able to conceive of it. The Earth was visible to us in one of the rear view screens that had been set up and we could watch it become a huge silvery ball. The seas and continents were clearly distinguishable despite the pall of clouds and smoke that hung over them. It was awesome and breath-taking, though not nearly as much as we might have imagined. These same sights had been seen before through television transmitters on the remotely controlled rockets that had been built. In spite of our relatively blase attitudes, probably all of us felt an unworded thrill more at the thought of being the first humans to do and see it, than at the sights we were seeing.

WE MAINTAINED a low acceleration, and as distance counterbalanced gravity, we could feel the lessening attraction of the Earth for us. It was a magnificent sensation almost indescribable, contrary to some beliefs that it might be inducive of nausea. We felt none. I was fearful for Peggy, but she was as unconcerned as Dr. Henderson and myself.

The only danger that could conceivably menace us was the possibility of being struck by a meteor, but even then the chance of that occurring was so slim that it gave us little pause. Had it occurred, if the meteor was large enough we'd never know what hit us. If the meteor was extremely small as most are, and if none of us were injured by its striking, we had equipment to plug the hole.

Our oxygen supply was more than adequate to take care of us, and there was a large enough converter to supply us with more than we needed. All in all we were in a pretty enviable position.

We suffered – or rather, underwent – the peculiar effects associated with weightlessness as we neared the moon. Eating and drinking was not difficult because provision had been made for that. We sucked our liquids from plastic containers. If it were necessary, all we would have to do would be to increase the acceleration sufficiently to give us a "gravity." The floor of the control cabin would then be our "Earth."

The trip showed no signs of being eventful. Everything went as planned.

We maintained constant communication with Earth. The high frequency radio worked perfectly, a tribute to Peggy's skill. The power plant gave us no trouble, nor did we expect any, for the test craft had proven beyond the shadow of a doubt that Dr. Henderson had built well. His theory and his practice were both correct.

Peggy and I were talking of the tale we'd have to tell our grandchildren, as the surface of the moon loomed ever nearer and we were applying now a negative acceleration.

Peggy's hearing is acute. Over the hiss of the motor and the blare of the loudspeaker, she must have sensed something.

"Jim," she asked, startled, "did you hear something?"

"What do you mean? I didn't hear anything. Where?"

"Dad, did you?" She turned to Dr. Henderson who was working with pencil and paper on some calculations.

He looked up: "No, I didn't hear anything. Why?"

The answer came. There was a shuddering blast that undoubtedly came from the electrical room. It was muffled and thumpy – as if it was a blanketed explosion. The loudspeaker went dead. The televisors blinked once and our only view was through the quartzite

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ports.

Simultaneously Peggy and I dashed for the electrical room – groped would be a better word. The gravitation was non-existent. We reached it and I tore open the door. The sight that greeted our eyes was terrible and a grim rejoinder against overconfidence.

Every bit of glassware, insulators, and vacuum tubes, was a smashed wreck. Glass and metal, wire and parts littered the floor. The cause was obvious. Someone, somehow, had planted a time bomb. Peggy's premonition was more than that. She undoubtedly had heard a relay click just before the infernal gadget went off.

"But I checked it a dozen times. I don't know how they managed to conceal a time bomb in the place." Peggy was almost in tears. She felt that this was her responsibility.

"Don't worry about it, honey," I said. "It isn't the worse thing that could happen."

Suddenly I thought that if a bomb had been planted here, it could have been planted anywhere. I dashed down to the "engine room" but I couldn't find the slightest evidence. As we assembled again in the control there were a hundred questions in our minds.

I VOICED the obvious one: "Why did they or he plant such a small bomb? Why the radio equipment? It can't stop the expedition. That's the fishy part of the whole thing. Why do they want to knock out our communications? It doesn't make sense."

"I'll manage to knock together some sort of a transmitter. We have some spare tubes and there are plenty of parts. But it'll take time." Peggy was contrite and anxious to make up for what she considered her failing.

Dr. Henderson was grim-faced. "I'm not worried about communications, Peg; what bothers me is the 'why' of it. For some reason agents unknown want to stop our communicating with Earth. Is there any possible reason?"

"Yes, Dr. Henderson," I answered, "there is!"

"Why, Jim? Why?"

"Somebody – the Soviets – have beaten us to the moon!" I came back at him.

"Ridiculous, Jim. You don't know what you're saying. They'd have broadcast it all over the Earth if they had."

"They wouldn't if they had a good reason."

"I think Dad's right, Jim," Peggy said. "Whatever they wrecked our com-system for, it wasn't because of that, that's for sure."

Well, we quieted down after that. I didn't press the issue. Instead I helped Peggy salvage what she could from the mess that had been made of the control room. By the time we had assembled enough for a workable transmitter, landing time was nearing. We'd have to postpone the transmitter for now, even though there would be a great deal of worry and doubt back on Earth.

The Moon loomed up before us and we decided to select the edge of a modest-sized crater with what looked like a suitable plain. The partial glimpse we had seen of the other side of the Moon convinced us that it was no different than our present site. Besides we wanted to be within sight of the Earth's telescopes. We planned to set off a huge flare as a symbol. Now with the radio out, it would be the only assurance that we had landed.

I took over the controls. The *Luna* responded of course as we had intended. The cracked, rugged "terrain" loomed beneath us and because the television viewers were out of order the landing would have to be made blind. I had to "feel" the ship down.

Carefully and delicately I toyed with

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the controls, holding the nose steady and balancing the ship on its tail jets. Watching the instruments like a hawk, I let us lose altitude, a centimeter at a time. As the ship descended, Dr. Henderson and Peggy both kept close watch through their sides of the ports.

"Keep it up, Jim. Steady as you go." Dr. Henderson called to me. "Your jets are licking ground. I'd say roughly twenty more meters."

"It's straight and clear on this side," Peggy called. "Can't we go down slower?"

"I'm dropping it in as tiny decrements as I can, Peggy," I answered. "I don't think we'll hit very hard."

It was the work of the better part of an hour to lower the vessel so slowly but I couldn't afford to take a chance. If I should drop it too fast on one side, I might tip the craft over, and as ruggedly built as it was, I would have done tremendous damage.

There was a gentle shudder that ran the length of the ship, a mere whisper, then a bump.

"We made it, Jim, we made it!" Peggy cried excitedly and came dancing over to me. I shut off the power, jumped up and gave her the first kiss in the moon. She clung tightly to me. "I'm so happy, Jim."

"Me too, darling. Well, Dr. Henderson," I released Peggy and shook hands with him, "may I congratulate you, sir? This trip is more yours than anyone else's."

Peggy ran over to him and kissed him. "Dad," she said, "we knew you'd do it someday."

THE GAUNT and rigid lines of Dr. Henderson's face relaxed. I thought for a moment that he might even cry—he was so overcome with emotion. He managed to regain his composure after a minute and briskly he headed toward the floor cabinet where we kept the space suits. "Let's think of work; congratulations can come when we get back."

"Sir," I said, "I think that Peggy and I, being less valuable to this trip, ought to make the first exploration. Don't you think that's reasonable?"

"What you mean is that the both of you are a lot younger—eh?" he shot back, and a smile covered his face.

I had to grin, too. "Something like that, Dr. Henderson."

We got out the suits; they were quite conventional. They or their prototype had long been in service for the super-high altitude rocket-work that was being done every day back on Earth, and the only modification was the insertion of transceivers, and a longer-lasting oxygen supply. The suits were good for about eighteen hours. They were sturdily constructed of neoprene and flexible metal mesh for abrasion protection. The transparent helmets had polaroid rotatable shades in them, as well as lead glass protection so that the intense solar radiation wouldn't harm us.

Peggy and I slipped into ours—struggled is the word—and as we had previously decided, we each took an automatic rifle of very small calibre — it's range and accuracy on this light-gravity world would be as good as any heavier weapon on Earth — and we also took *Alpenstocken* to help us climb if we had to. We were ready to step out on the Moon!

First we checked our radios, our breathing equipment, and our instruments. "We'll make the first trip a casual one and we won't go far from the ship," I said. "We won't take a chance on getting lost. We'll keep the ship in sight!"

"While you two are gone, I'll do what I can toward assembling a new transmitter," Dr. Henderson said. "Are you going to set off the flare now?"

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"I think it would be a good idea to wait until a little later. Then you can join us in doing it." I answered.

"All right, we'll work it that way. Peg, how are we fixed for spare tubes? Have we got any big bottles?"

"Dad, there are two one thousand tee aitches. I think you can build a power amplifier around them, and I'll throw in a preamplifier and a modulator section when we come back. We should be able to sort of push a signal back to Earth with that set-up. They've got some super-sensitive receivers on us right now I'll bet. Don't you think so Jim?" Peggy turned toward me.

"She's right, Dr. Henderson," I said. "You do what you can on the amplifier. We'll see what the lunar surface is like."

Dr. Henderson was in constant communication with us of course. We gave our helmets the final adjustments, and I took Peggy by the hand to the escape tube. We climbed or "floated" down the ladder, to the airlock.

As we waited for the doors to seal, I turned to Peggy:

"Scared, honey?" I asked.

"Are you?"

"No."

"Then, I'm not either."

I bumped my helmet lightly against hers. "Remind me to kiss you when we get out of these things," I said.

"Don't worry, I will."

Finally, the door above us was sealed. I opened the side door. "You have the honor," I said, "of being the first woman to set foot on the Moon."

I flung my arm in wide-swept gesture like an Elizabethan gallant. Peggy mincingly stepped out on the surface of the Moon! Of course she sank to her ankles. In spite of the low gravitation, she had enough weight to sink into the powdery pumice that formed the satellite's surface. I followed. It was a weird sensation. But walking wasn't difficult. The terrain was barren and hideous. It was just a mass of rock, ruts, crevices, with not a sign of life to it. We had hoped we might land near one of the trial robot-rockets that had been shot to the moon, but we couldn't find any. Possibly their remains were buried too deeply in the pumice crest for us ever to find them.

WE COULD walk quite a distance from the ship and yet keep it in sight. Its tall cylindrical shape served as our guidepost. The lights in it were unnecessary. Peggy followed behind me. I carefully and gingerly stepped along. It was not easy for the crevices in many spots were deep—apparently bottomless and here and there on the fronts of craggy structures, we could detect openings that could be only the mouths of caverns. We did not attempt to explore any. Our initial trip was to study the land—nothing else—as much as we would have liked to.

All the while we kept in radio communication with Dr. Henderson. I could tell from the tone of his voice, even over the flat-sounding loudspeakers in our helmets, that he was more excited than we, even though nothing of significance had been turned up.

We had gone about two miles from the ship. Suddenly I had a funny feeling. While I had been talking with Dr. Henderson, Peggy had not interrupted the conversation. I turned toward her.

"Darling—" I started to say, and then stopped. Peggy was not there!

I couldn't believe my eyes. She had been in back of me not ten seconds before. Where was she?

"Peggy! Peggy! Where are you?" Dr. Henderson heard my excited shouts over the phones. "What happened, Jim? What happened to Peggy?"

I told him. I didn't half believe my-

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self. She had disappeared completely. I started to retrace my steps. The footprints were still clear in the pumice. About twenty feet from where I had noticed her disappearance, her footsteps ended. It was just alongside a three foot opening in a hillock. We had commented on it at the time and I had turned away. The answer was obvious, but it didn't seem like Peggy. She had decided to explore the cave. Maybe she wanted to scare me. I poked my head in the cave. Because the hillock was between the ship and myself I couldn't talk with Dr. Henderson. I just enjoined him to remain where he was, while I did this exploring. I could tell that he wanted very much to come out, but neither of us wanted to leave the ship alone.

I stuck my head in the hole. It was completely dark. I brought up my hand torch and before I could light it, before I could touch the button, it was wrenched from me. I found myself staring into a grinning Mongoloid face, clad in a space suit that was almost identical to my own. There was no chance for me to unlimber my rifle. The Mongolian held a pistol in his gloved hand. He pointed it at me and gestured! I understood all right.

I climbed into the cave mouth. A half dozen figures similar to the one who held the gun on me, were waiting. They all carried arms and lights.

For a moment I was stunned. Human beings on the Moon before us! It was only a moment before I had gathered my wits. The Mongolian and Slavic features of my captors could mean only one thing. The Soviets had beaten us to the Moon.

Closely surrounded by the soldiers who had said nothing, though I could see their suits were equipped with radiophones, I was led to a large steel door, apparently an airlock. My doubts were immediately dispelled. This was where Peggy had been taken. And emblazoned on the door of the airlock was that unforgettable symbol—a crossed hammer and sickle. Things began falling in place rapidly. There was sense now to the timed destruction of our communication equipment aboard the *Luna*. Dr. Henderson, I prayed, get some sort of a transmitter going—but quick.

We went through the airlock. Still the Soviets said nothing. We passed through the second door of the lock. The sight that greeted me there was unbelievable —I believed it!

A miniature city, intensely compact, had been built. Living quarters, streets, electric vehicles, lay spread before my eyes. But the ominous thing was the piles of material laying everywhere in confusing but neat order. Stockpiles of metal of every type and description, electric motors, and countless crates of what could only be complex machinery. Everything here was obviously intended for the construction of a permanent base. The number of rocket trips that must have been made in order to transport this base to the Moon, staggered me. The Soviets were really doing this on a grand scale, a scale that made our venture look like child's play.

WHAT was the objective of all this Herculean labor? What was the point in building this elaborate base in secrecy. True it was our intention eventually to do the same, but certainly our government wouldn't have done it in secrecy. There was something very wrong here.

The guards who were taking me somewhere did not prevent me from removing my helmet. The air-plant here must be huge, I thought. There was the same flat odor and taste to it, that existed in any color airsystem dependent upon machinery.

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We entered a low structure, illuminated as everything here, by fluorescent lamps. The whole thing was eerie and unreal. How desperately I wanted to contact Dr. Henderson. I had a feeling it was more than necessary although so far nothing really hostile had been done against us. I told myself that the Soviets were merely taking natural precautions in holding us, but I didn't really believe that. The radiophone wouldn't carry of course through the rock above us. That isolation from the *Luna* was what bothered me.

The soldiers motioned me to enter the doorway. They remained behind. I entered. The room was obviously a headquarters of some sort.

There was a desk covered with instruments and communications equipment. Behind it sat an officer in full military regalia—a colonel by his insignia. In a chair in front of him, still wearing her suit was Peggy; her helmet lay at her side. As I entered, she turned. Her face was white, but her lips were pressed together into thin lines of determination.

"Jim, darling!" she shouted as she jumped up to greet me.

"Sit down, please, Miss Henderson," the officer said in perfect English. "I'm sure Dr. Benton will do the same." He gestured to another chair in front of the desk.

"Yes, I will," I said. "Peggy—don't be afraid. I'm sure Colonel . . ." I hesitated.

"Ogloneff," he supplied.

". . . Colonel Ogloneff will easily explain this impossible situation and release us at once." I finished.

"Not exactly, Dr. Benton. You see we have other intentions," he said, a nasty smile, almost of contempt, on his face.

"You know about the *Luna*?" I asked. "You understand that we represent the government of the United States? You know that our intentions are peaceful and scientific?"

"Yes, I know. I know *all* about the *Luna* and you. But about your intentions—I question them. In fact, I don't believe them!" he said harshly.

Peggy and I remained silent. We waited for him to speak. She glanced at me and I looked sideways at her. I shrugged.

"You may very well play cool and calm," Colonel Ogloneff snapped. "I'm going to stop this play-acting. My government considers that a state of war exists between it and yours. Undeclared, true—but a state of war. Therefore we are taking over the Moon and making preparations against attack. We are building rocket launching platforms very soon. In fact they are under construction now. Does that satisfy you?"

I laughed—but it was no laughing matter. Defense! That was ridiculous. They were building rocket launching equipment for one purpose. When they were ready it would be a simple matter to launch a host of radio-guided atomic war-headed rockets to any spot on Earth. And there was no possibility of defense for us!

Here in this underground cavern lay the seeds for a plan that couldn't fail. I ignored Colonel Ogloneff's statements.

"What do you intend doing with us?" I asked.

His anger had subsided. He said mockingly: "I'm afraid we'll have to try the three of you—yes, we know about Dr. Henderson too—as invaders of Soviet territory. It's too bad but the three of you will of course be executed." He called to the guards. "Take them away," he said.

I WAS trembling with rage. I wanted to tear this monstrous agent of the Soviets apart. But it would have been pointless. Besides we were still alive. As we were led through the door, he gave us a parting shot:

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"Did you have any difficulty with your communications equipment?"

We didn't bother answering. The guards led us to a storage building about a hundred feet from the airlock. It was isolated and surrounded with mountains of beams, girders, crates and boxes.

We were shoved into the building which had only one door, a single light, and before which a guard was stationed. Nothing had been taken from us but our guns. I held Peggy as close to me as I could through our bulky suits. Gently I kissed her, but there were no tears in her eyes. Only smouldering anger.

"Jim, those fiends!" she said. "Think of what they're going to do. If only Dad has a transmitter built. He could give the Earth warning, and they'd get rockets here in a hurry."

"They might even be on the way now," I said, but in my heart, I knew this couldn't be. "If anything is done, it's got to be from this end."

We talked for an hour or two trying to think of possibilities. Through the window in the door we could see that the base was larger than we had thought. From what we could see, it must be manned by at least five hundred men. The main thing that worried me was what if they had already captured the *Luna* and Dr. Henderson? Still, I told myself, it would be a pretty hard thing to do. He was smart and shrewd.

We sat in helpless impatience for better than three hours, interrupted only once by the appearance of a guard with two trays of fairly palatable food. I had finished eating and I was pacing back and forth like a caged lion. I felt so impotent. I could do nothing to break up a scheme that meant the sure subjugation of the Earth if not the destruction of everything on it. Suddenly my reverie was disturbed.

"Jim, can you read Russian?" Peggy asked.

"Of course not. Why?" I answered petulantly.

"Look at these boxes," she said.

I looked. Previously we had paid no attention to the contents of the room, though it seemed funny that any stores would be placed in a locked room. The room was practically filled to the ceiling with rather carefully made wooden crates, completely sealed and bound with metal bands. Their sides were lavishly decorated with Russian letters and symbols. Neither of us understood them except for the numbers which were the same. I looked closely at the side of one of the boxes.

"Isn't this Uranium concentrate?" Peggy asked. I studied the symbology closely. It was! I couldn't believe my eyes. We were caged in a room with tons of Uranium metal.

Peggy looked up at me and for the first time since we had been captured a broad and lovely smile wreathed her lovelier face. "Are you thinking of the same thing I am?" she quizzed laughingly.

"Darling, I haven't been a nuclear physicist for nothing," I answered. "Watch my smoke. You're the radio expert. Rip the transceiver from your suit while I open one of these boxes. All we need now is time. Pray that they don't disturb us. Their cockiness is going to cost them this trip."

With the aid of the small tool kit fastened to each suit, I managed to rip the band off one of the boxes rather easily. All the while Peggy worked fast and furiously with her wrist watch and the transceiver ripped from her suit.

"What sort of a time delay should I build into the fuse?" she asked. I marveled at her skill and dexterity.

"Give it a four hour delay, darling. That should be long enough after we get out of this flea trap—if we get out of this flea trap," I corrected myself.

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The box I opened, I dragged to the side of the room away from the door so that it wouldn't be seen. It took Peggy the better part of an hour to complete her work. When she finished, she presented me with as neat a fuse as I could want. Her watch formed the timing element, which, when properly set would cause contacts to close, delivering a nicely timed high-frequency pulse of current at a fairly high voltage for any length of time desired. This latter was controlled by setting a potentiometer on the converted transmitter section of the transceiver. All in all it was a beautiful job.

"If we ever get out of this, darling," I told Peggy, "I'll see that you get a good job in a factory as a radio technician."

"You'd make a good dock-walloper yourself," she shot back glancing at the opened box. "Remind me not to kiss you again. Seriously, Jim, how are we going to get out of here?"

"Junior is still outside. We can't do anything yet. Give me the fuse. I'll get it set anyhow."

I TOOK the neat job which she handed me, and set it to one side of the box. With the aid of a little piston and cylinder devised from a condenser and a scrap bit of metal, I had a chamber suitable for setting off the atomic blast—"triggering it" so to speak.

Our preparations were complete. The minute we left the room, regardless of how, I was going to flip the switch. We left no traces of our handiwork. Four hours after we left this room, things were going to happen—mighty unpleasant things.

We waited. The guard remained on duty. The door was locked from the outside. There seemed to be no chance of escape. Probably right now they were drumming up some sort of a court just to satisfy the conventions—or more likely, their own sense of the conventions. We had better act, I thought, and soon. We were going to wreck their pretty scheme—that was for sure—but both Peggy and I wanted to escape with whole skins if possible. I thought of a plan and told her.

We went to the door and through the window we attracted the attention of the guard. He was apparently a technician from the little I knew of Soviet insignia. Maybe he had a soul. I tried to find out. With hand motions we made it clear that we would like some water. He called out. Evidently there was no answer. He turned to us and shrugged as if to say "there's no one around to get the water, so go thirsty."

We were insistent. We hammered and rapped on the window. After about five minutes of this pantomine, he finally got up. He looked around carefully. There was no one in sight. He walked into the airlock section, a short distance away. Soon he came back with a metal container filled with water. He set it down in front of the door, drew a key from his pocket and opened it. As he did so, I stepped back, flicked the switch on the fuse, and as quickly stepped back to the half-opened door. My arms shot out, and in an instant I had a grip around his throat.

Savagely I kneeded him in the face. While he wore a space suit, it was as awkward for him as it was for me. Peggy hammered him on the head with her helmet. He passed out. I took the automatic rifle and cartridge pouch he was carrying. Peggy took his automatic pistol. It happened so rapidly and so easily we couldn't believe it ourselves. We dragged him to one side, leaving the door open so that there would be no inspection of the room we had been confined in.

Slipping on our helmets, we dashed for the airlock. I entered the room with my rifle ready. There were three men

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sitting in the lock. As fast as I could press the trigger, I fired. The three were dead before they knew what had happened. The men in the lock beyond this door, flung it open. With Peggy right behind me, I dashed through knocking the first man down. There were three men here too. Peggy shot one right through the head and I blasted down the other two.

The lock mechanism of the outer door was as simple as our lug-fastened lock on the ship. I undid the lugs, pressed the button and the motor swung the door open. Peggy and I shot through it into the tunnel.

Under the light gravitational influence we half-jumped half-ran down in to the opening. We knew pursuit would be imminent.

I put my helmet against Peggy's when we had gotten through the cave's opening. It was the only way I could speak to her now that her transceiver was gone. It was pure sound conduction.

"Listen, darling," I said, "You head for the ship, get the controls set and leave the lower lock open. Air or no air we've got to make a break in a hurry. I'll lag behind and cover the cave mouth so that they can't bring any big stuff out to stop the ship."

"Only hurry, Jim. Please." And she was off toward the ship.

I went toward the ship too, circling in an ever growing circle but always keeping the mouth of the cave in front of me.

Sure enough, Peggy was halfway to the Luna, when men started to emerge from the opening. I knelt on one knee and took careful aim. As fast as I could, I poured a devastating fire into them. Five of them dropped, and for a moment no more came through. Evidently some officer must have been behind them, for more started through again and again I fired. Again no more came through. That was my cue.

I turned and ran like mad for the *Luna* and as I neared her she became the most magnificent sight I had ever seen. Peggy was aboard, for the lower lock was open. I was not a hundred feet from it when I turned my head to look back. Men in space suits were boiling from the cavern opening. A few were taking careful aim at me.

Ten feet to go. Something hit me in the ankle. My air purifiers overloaded and went out. I was suffocating. I was dying. I stumbled face down. That probably saved my life. I managed to drag myself into the airlock. I heard the hammer-like blows of bullets against the Luna's steel sides.

Then I passed out. I didn't even remember closing the lock.

WHEN I came to the first thing I recognized was Peggy's face above me. Next my ears were assaulted and delighted by the thin whine of the motors. We had made it!

"Darling, it's me!" Peggy said as she held me in her arms. "Can you talk?"

"Who wants to?" I mumbled. "Did it go off yet?"

"You've been out two hours," she said. "I don't know."

I sat up and we started to talk with Dr. Henderson. Peggy had told him our incredible tale. He said that for a moment he was going to follow us, but that getting communications was still the logical thing and the most important. Now, he and Peggy were working together on the transmitter and it was almost completed.

"It still doesn't mean a thing," Dr. Henderson said. "Unless that fuse triggers the atomic explosive. Our government will never get rockets here in time to stop it. The only thing we can do is hope."

And so they worked on the transmitter

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while the zero hour drew near; I could do nothing but wait. The minutes dragged by like hours. Supposing our fuse had been found. Supposing it failed to work. Then what? Then we could be sure that within days, rockets loaded with atomic warheads would be dropping on the principal cities of the Western World. We held civilization in our grasp—or rather a cheap little mechanism plus Lady Luck, Dame Fortune, and Miss Chance, did.

According to the time for which I had set the fuse we had eight minutes to go. The moon was still a huge sphere by Earthly standards, but we were distant enough to watch in perfect personal safety—which didn't really mean a thing. Yet we were close enough to see everything in detail.

Eight minutes, seven minutes, six minutes, five minutes, four minutes, three minutes, two minutes, one minute, zero minutes — H-hour — and nothing happened!

"The fuse is defective or they've found—"

A gigantic cloud of dust shaped like a needle suddenly and with lightning-like rapidity lanced out from the surface of the Moon. An intensely brilliant flare of light accompanied it, a flare toward which none of us were staring. A visible section of the Moon's crust rose and settled. Dust boiled and fumed furiously and that gigantic blast of intra-atomic energy conveyed its component energies to the particles of the Moon's surface by that mysterious activity. The Moon had received a mortal wound. Nothing within a hundred miles of that explosion—completely catastrophic—had survived. The menace was gone.

Peggy and I were in each other's arms.

"Darling," she whispered against my ear, "do you realize what we've done? Those madmen are gone. Now our rockets can land!"

"Peggy, stop talking about rockets and let me kiss you." I said.

"I won't. It's important Jim. I want to talk ab—"

She stopped talking as my lips met hers. In a dream world, I heard Dr. Henderson's voice:

"Bureau of Standards! Bureau of Standards! Take this down in detail. Dr. Kingston, listen to this report! You saw the explosion? You know what it was? Now listen to what caused it. Take it down. . . ."

THE END

Big Bertha Betatron

★ **By Fram Ferris** ★

EVERYONE who is interested in the progress of science has heard of the cyclotron, that incredibly huge magnet-machine for accelerating charged particles and for aiding the fundamental study of nuclear physics. Equally important but perhaps less well-known is a similar machine called the betatron. It made its appearance a few years before the war.

The betatron is similar to the cyclotron, but instead of accelerating ordinary general charged particles as does the cyclotron, it is specifically designed to accelerate electrons—"beta particles"—from which it obtains the name. As in the cyclotron, a combination of a changing electric field and an intense magnetic field, serves to give ordinary electrons from a heated filament, a terrific velocity. These electrons then may be used for whatever research is at hand. One of the most interesting applications of the betatron, is its use as the electron source in a super-super x-ray generator.

Scientists have kept improving the elementary x-ray tube from a simple gas-filled electric discharge tube, to its present state of being. Now an x-ray tube is a highly evacuated tube with a filament at one end and a target at the other. The filament boils off electrons—these, driven by the powerful voltage between the tube elements, hurl themselves at the target which is usually tungsten, but may be almost any other

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metal, and vanish in a coruscant flare of electromagnetic radiation—that is, x-rays.

The penetrating power of x-rays depends on their energy, and the energy in turn depends mainly on the voltage that the tube is capable of withstanding. With the conventional type of x-ray tube, the practical limit seems to be about two million volts, after which it is impossible to insulate or manage such huge voltages. Some other means must be found to provide electrons of still higher energies to smash their way into targets to release still shorter and more penetrating x-rays.

The answer—or one of the answers—to this problem, is the betatron. Electrons are accelerated to vast velocities within the whirling electric field, and then allowed to emerge to strike the desired target. The only difference between this method of x-ray generation and the conventional, is the fact that the target is literally outside the tube—by several feet.

The resultant x-radiation that is generated by this process corresponds to what would be regarded in tubes as hundreds of millions of volts! X-rays of this caliber go through gigantic thicknesses of material like a knife through cheese. Steel, concrete, lead—almost anything is penetrated by beams of such short wave length.

The betatron and its target are housed in a steel, lead and concrete structure of huge size, and when the machine is operating, no human remains near it. Everything is done by remote control. The adjustments are taken care of by clever instrumentation and the liberal use of selsyn motors.

The danger of being near such a machine is obvious. This is not simply a matter of being slightly burned or sterilized—here, flesh withers before such destructiveness.

The penetrating x-radiation that is produced, will penetrate many feet of steel. Hence it is perfect for the examination of huge castings that formerly were impossible to examine. Because of its intensity, the time element is shortened extremely, and what formerly took days with radium, now takes minutes. This is important in an industrial economy where time is the equivalent of money.

The betatron, by providing such powerful x-rays, also serves to help atomic research. X-rays, unlike most other forms of electromagnetic radiation, *do*—or can—cause nuclear reactions within the core of the atom. This is always important, because it is the nucleus of the atom whose secrets scientists are desirous of ferreting out.

More and more, physics is becoming the science connected with high-powered costly machines. But the dividends cannot be measured except in terms of human welfare.

Ghosts!

By William Karney

MANY people today are beset by that ancient horror. Ghosts are in our midst! And these malignant creatures are interfering with our pleasures. Sly and devilish they sneak in just where they're not wanted and where they can have the most fun at the most unpleasant times.

These ghosts we're referring to are not of the conventional variety. They appear only in Television sets!

TV owners know them well. They will be sitting in the living room enjoying a pleasant wrestling match or a variety show, when suddenly the screen will distort and perhaps the picture will appear twice or more giving everything a blurred, fuzzy look. Why is this? What are these strange actors? What causes the funny appearances of the ghosts? What are ghosts?

Ghosts are caused by reflected radio waves. In fact they are the same radio wave picked up twice and projected on the TV receiver. And because the reflected wave is picked up from a slightly different point, its timing is not quite the same. It may appear on the screen a few millionths of a second later, which results in an out-of-phase image and furriness.

How can ghosts be eliminated from TV? Only by the tedious practice of trial and error. Since ghosts are caused by reflections from adjacent structures, the TV antenna must be so oriented that these ghosts are avoided. That is the solution.

Perhaps, as in conventional radio practice, a wave trap of some sort may be developed in the future. And just as a wave trap removes the interfering wave-length from the incoming radio-wave, so may a wave trap for ghost images do the same. This of course is highly theoretical and no such device exists at present nor is there any guarantee that one will be invented. Nevertheless we can hope for such a thing. Nothing is impossible and we dare predict that it may be done. Who would have thought that TV was possible in the first place?

Nothing that man sets his mind to is impossible in applied science, it seems. Whether or not this is a good thing remains to be seen. Regardless, the ghosts must be eliminated one way or another. Perhaps the answer lies in obtaining an African witch doctor and exorcising them!

* * *

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That Guy, Satan, Sends Me!

by George Reese

Swing music was frowned upon in Heaven, so Send-me Slim felt he'd be much happier in Hell—where music was *very* hot

"NUTS!" the Perfessor said.

"Any particular kind?" Send-me Slim asked sarcastically.

"Wot's the difference?" Jumbo O'Toole demanded. "We're all that way, ain't we?"

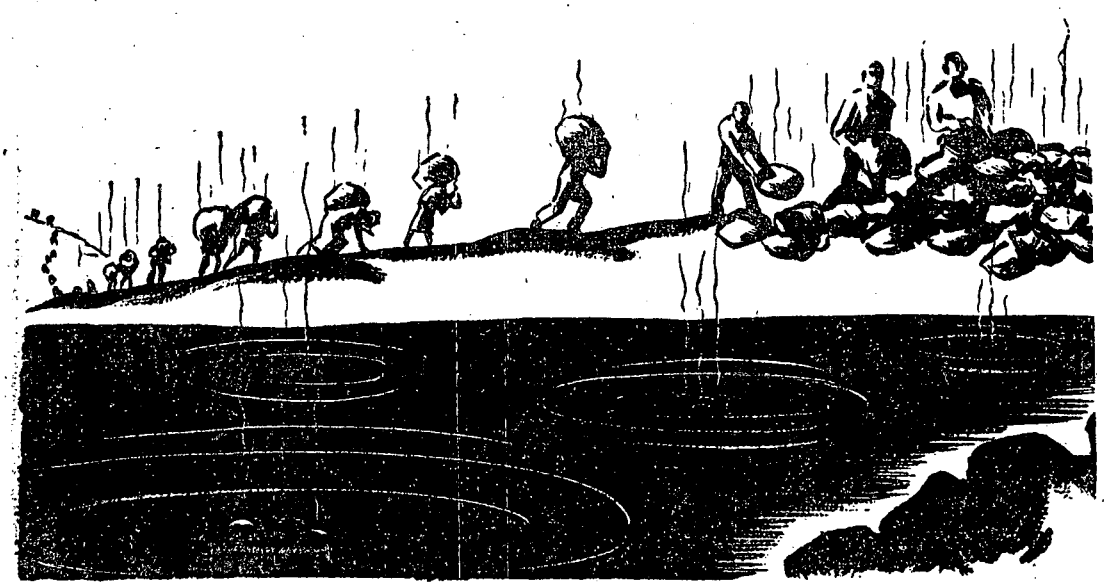
"Yeah," Flaherty the cop agreed. "But not when it comes to music."

"S'pose we break it up," a new voice suggested. It was that of Charley Borsh, the genial owner of the Tea Shop on Van Buren street. A peculiar-looking pipe snuggled tightly in the right corner of Charley's mouth. The attention of the half dozen men at the corner table not far from the door was drawn to the pipe as though it held concealed in the bowl some odd kind of yocky, a new kind, one which came in the bowl of a pipe.

"What the hell is that?" Flaherty asked.

Charley's eyes became a little crossed as they centered themselves on the pipe below the line of his chin.

"Uh, uh," he stuttered slightly, "uh Meerschaum. Yeah. Breaking it in. Fella named Phil, over at my pipe shop, told me to get a chamois jacket for it.



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The demon led Slim to a lake of brimstone, where people carried steaming sacks to a huge pile . . .

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Says it'll get nice and brown all over . . ."

"Nuts!" the Perfessor said again. It was obvious he had a one-track mind. And that the train he was on knew no other gauge than that track.

Charley looked at the Perfessor with that air known as judicious. On Charley it didn't look good. Even with the chamois-covered pipe he was wearing.

"Well now, Perfessor," he began. "Uh, uh, what's the fuss about?"

They all began to talk at once. It was Send-me Slim's voice which drowned the rest out, however, and in the end became the voice in the wilderness of their ignorance, as he called it.

Slim had the kind of voice that would have been noticed in a harbor full of tug boats, all of whose horns were going at the same time. Not that it was so deep, or full, or resonant, or anything but what it was, a shrill pipe, pitched so high it was a shriek. Charley's face drew in lines of pain as the shrill shriek drowned out all other sounds including that of the loud drunk at the far end of the bar who was offering to take on all comers. Charley's hands came up as though in protection.

"Please, uh, Slim!" he begged. "I can hear you. Uh, I'm right here. Not over in Evanston."

"Well, these guys was yellin' so loud . . ." Slim shrieked in self-defense.

"That's all right," Charley said. "Just lower your, uh, voice to a shout. That's better," he concluded as Slim put the soft pedal on.

"It's on account of Phlug," Slim said.

The look of pain deepened on Charley's face. The very mention of the name, Phlug, gave him the creeps. Morning, noon; no not noon, thank goodness, he was at the tea shop then; but at night the horror was resumed, Phlug, Phlug, Phlug. Damn it! Was that all the kids learned at school, Phlug?

"'S matter? Don't you like Phlug, either?" Slim demanded.

"Listen!" Charley said softly. "If I owned all the corned beef in the world, and that guy Phlug was told that the only thing he could eat to live was corned beef, ham he'd get by me."

"Ahh! A wise guy. Just a wise guy! Why'n't you write gags f'r radio comics?" Slim demanded. He was in high dudgeon. Abruptly, he shifted to low dudgeon. "Look! Who makes America dance? Who makes America sing? Who makes America—"

"Act like St. Vitus was the national hero," Charley broke in. "I know. Phlug. Listen, crack-pot, and I'm being polite, that trumpet playing goon makes noise—not music! Wah, wah, wah! Every time I turn on the radio, that's all I hear. Does Truman make a speech, they got to interrupt it to play a new Phlug recording!"

"Nuts!" said the Perfessor. "That's what the whole kit an' caboodle of you are, nuts. And I'm includin' you in on that deal, too, Charley. Now, if you'd asked me instead of this platter-bait, beat-out, hep-happy 'gator from Decatur, what the argument was about, you'd of got an answer, instead of what you did."

"So give me the answer," Charley asked unhappily. He should have known better than to get involved in any of the arguments which had to do with any of the inmates of the Mansion, that relic on Van Buren street. Particularly when the two in question were the Perfessor and Slim.

HE HAD known the two for twenty years, from the time the tea shop was a speak, back in the pro days. The two men had been regulars then. Now, looking back in his mind's eye, he realized something peculiar about them.

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They never talked of the day's mooch or of current events, or of any of the things that were common among the regulars. Music. They were music appreciators. In the old days it had been the trio and piano in the back room. Now it was the radio, but not the same programs. Slim liked swing, the Perfessor, classic.

"It's like this," the Perfessor explained. "I say that Slim don't know what he's talking about when he says that swing's the thing. Why? Because all swing comes from the classics. Listen to some of the stuff; no, listen to all of it. Where's the background? Classic! Every tune . . . why I'll bet those tune writers never'd be able to compose, weren't for the public domain."

It was Charley, the arbiter, now.

"Well, what's the question?" he asked.

"There ain't none," Slim said heatedly. "I say Phlug's 'Sentimental Swing' is got all the operas, and overtures and . . . and all the rest of that junk wiped off the map."

But somehow, Slim felt he was bested in this argument. It wasn't the looks of pity bestowed on him by the others. It was some inner feeling that told him he wasn't quite sure, himself, about it. Suddenly he became angry.

"Okay, wise guy!" he screeched. "Go ahead! Listen to that Fairy Serenade on the Hyacinth Milk program. And see where it'll get ya! I'm goin' up to the Mansion. Johnny Phlug's on in about ten minutes. That'll be better than listenin' to you guys."

He went out of the tea shop as fast as his short, heavy legs could go. But ten feet past the tavern he slowed to a crawl. For some reason or other he didn't want to go back to the lobby of the Mansion tonight. That damned Perfessor! Always lecturing him on music. Yet, Slim had to admit that the man knew music. He wondered, idly, where the Perfessor had learned all he knew. There was no question in Slim's mind but that when it came to a knowledge of music, the other man spoke with authority. Whereas Slim could only speak generally and only say he liked swing because it satisfied him. Slim didn't realize it but he was suffering from an inferiority complex.

An echo of something the Perfessor had once said came to haunt Slim as he walked along.

"The trouble with you, Slim," the other had said, "is that you've never seen music being performed. Doesn't sound important, you might say. But I think it is. Maybe if you saw the antics of some of those bands, you'd change your mind about them."

He came to a halt as he reached the barber shop, just before the entrance to the Mansion. The clock on the wall had caught his eye. The one in Charley's place had the wrong time. It was twenty minutes before broadcast time. Slim came to a weighty decision. Somehow or other he had to get into the studio at the Mart and see the Phlug band in action. But how?

Slim read Down Beat like the regulars at the tea shop read the Racing Form, as though it were the Bible. He, like they, knew the performances, past and present, of all the entries. The Phlug outfit was performing at that very minute at a Loop theater. Maybe, if he could mooch a pass from one of the band . . .

It shouldn't have taken him more than ten minutes to cross the Loop. But an acquaintance stopped him on Madison street. O'Malley, a copper on the morals squad. O'Malley's eyes went wide when he saw Slim. Slim spotted the other at the same instant. He tried to pass the cop but didn't quite make the grade.

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"And where might you be going at this hour?" O'Malley asked.

Slim came out with the first thing that came to his mind. He didn't realize the absurdity of what he said until the words passed his lips.

"There's a guy said there's a job over at John's Restaurant, on Dearborn street," Slim said, looking the cop straight in the eyes.

"And I suppose you're going to see about it?" O'Malley said with heavy humor.

"That I am," Slim replied.

O'MALLEY was silent. He rather liked the chunky little mooch. Slim never made it a habit, like some of the other bums on O'Malley's beat, to buttonhole passers-by and whine his wants in their ears. Slim made an honest mooch. But this about a job. It just didn't stack right.

"Levelin' on that, Slim?" O'Malley asked.

"Swear it," Slim said.

"Okay. Better take it, fella. I'll throw you in the can if I catch you on the bum tomorrow," O'Malley warned.

Slim nodded and scurried away. A look at another clock lent wings to the stocky legs. O'Malley had taken five precious minutes. Slim turned the corner of the alley and ran as fast as he could for the back stage entrance. But he wasn't the only one who had had ideas about seeing the Phlug outfit. Clustered about the stage door were perhaps a hundred girls, bobby-soxers. They milled about squealing loudly. Slim stopped short. It looked like he was stymied. The stage door opened and a slender individual, clad in a dinner jacket, was outlined in the yellow light. Immediately a chorus of voices were raised in demands for autographs. And Slim had an idea. He had seen that Phlug looked worried.

Slim shoved the girls aside as he plunged to the center of attraction. Panting slightly, Slim stood beside the taller man.

"Better hurry, Johnny," he said. "I'm on the costume ball committee. They sent me to look out for you. Look kids," he turned to the wondering and suddenly silent girls. "Johnny'll be at the, 'er, Palmer House after the broadcast. See him there. C'mon kid. We'll be late."

And without further ado, Slim pulled at the band leader's hand. Slim turned toward the west end of the alley but Phlug jerked him around toward the east end.

"Got a cab waiting here," Phlug said, as he shifted his hand so that now he was holding Slim instead of the reverse. "Get in," he said as they reached the cab.

"All right, now, what was the idea of that?" Phlug demanded, when they were at ease and the cab got rolling.

Slim swallowed hastily, looked at the good-natured, smiling face of the young band leader, and launched into a hurried résumé of why he had done what he did.

Phlug heard him through, laughed loudly and said:

"So you want to see a broadcast? Well, you just tag along, fella. I'll see to it that you get in."

Slim was in seventh heaven. At last he was going to be able to offer a better rebuttal to any of the Perfessor's jibes when the subject of seeing a band in action was brought up. He looked at Phlug from the corner of his eye. Nice looking guy, Slim thought. Young, too. But what the heck was he frowning about. Phlug turned just then and caught Slim's inquiring glance.

"Anything wrong?" he asked.

"Why . . why I guess not," Slim said.

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"What do you mean, you *guess* not? Don't you know?"

"Well . ." Slim continued lamely. "You look kinda . . . jees! You got the world by the short hair. But you look like an undertaker without a hearse. Something wrong?"

Phlug sighed, a soft exhalation of sound. It wasn't lost on Slim. He had an idea that Phlug was going to tell him something. But the leader only turned his head and stared moodily out the window. The cab turned west on Clark against traffic. Suddenly a car came shooting out of one of the eastbound lanes on Wacker and literally exploded in their path. The driver slammed on the brakes and twisted hard at the wheel. Too late. There was the grinding, metal-shearing crash of two cars meeting. Slim was thrown hard against Phlug. Then he recochetted off and head-on into the glass partition separating the driver from his passengers. There was the long-drawn-out shmeer of a trumpet blowing loudly in Slim's ear. There was no other sound.

"AND now, young man," a voice said. "I think you're next. Well? Let's not just stand there with your mouth open. Get it moving. What's your name?"

Slim looked about, bewildered. He was in some sort of office. There was a desk in front of him. Behind the desk sat a man. A smaller desk, about ten feet to the right of the larger one, caught his attention. A pretty girl sat behind that one and smiled at something at Slim's side. Slim turned and looked to see what the girl was smiling at and saw that Johnny Phlug stood at his side.

"Oh, come now. Come now," the officious looking and sounding individual behind the large desk said. "Let's not be hasty and tell all. After all, there's all of eternity, isn't there? And I only have some eight hundred and twenty-four thousand and twenty-six people to interview before the night. . . . Oh dear, what am I saying?"

"Now, Peter," the girl chided the man. She got up and Slim looked a little harder. She was a smart chick both in looks and figure. She was wearing a simple frock of some light material that seemed to fit like a sort of halo around the well-developed figure. She walked behind the irritated little man in the large swivel chair and rubbed the bald spot that shone so pinkly. "You've been working too hard. I'd ask the third cycle for a vacation."

"Vacation!" The little, bald-headed man sat erect. "Good heavens, as though I could leave! Who will take care of the new arrivals if I don't?"

"Well," she said, hesitating a trifle. "Gabriel's sort of been throwing hints that he'd like something better to do than lead the band . . ."

"Gabriel! That trumpet player! Always blowing his horn! If it'd be up to me . . ."

"I know, Peter. You'd put him in the string section. But these gentlemen. They're waiting, you know."

Peter brought his attention back to Johnny and Slim.

"Ah yes, these gentlemen." A sniff accompanied the words.

Slim was angered by the other's attitude.

"Something wrong, bud?" he asked loudly.

Peter's shoulders went up at the strident sound.

"Well?" Slim demanded.

"Please," Peter said gently. Then in a scream, "Don't screech like that! I can hear you. No, there's nothing wrong. Nothing, that is, that the records department couldn't make right.

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Sending someone like you up here. Why, it's a crime against heaven. You should go to the other place. And maybe you will."

"Just a minute," Johnny Phlug said in a troubled voice. "Just to get matters straight, are we to assume that we're in .... heaven?"

"Ah!" Peter acted surprised. "An intelligent person. Yes, young man, you *are* in heaven. Not officially, of course. Only in the lowest cycle. A sort of probationer, you are. But, in perhaps a few thousand years, you might be able to get into the second cycle. After all, you do have an awful lot of time. Now then, to business. First you, young man. Occupation?"

"I am, or rather was, a band leader."

"Good. Or perhaps not so good. You weren't a . . . trumpet . . ."

"Yes," Johnny admitted. "I was."

"Oh dear!" Peter exclaimed in a plaintive voice. "Not another. That Gabriel. Sometimes I think the whole thing's just a plot to people heaven with trumpet players! Now, take the violin . . ."

"Look, long-hair," Slim said. "*You* take the violin. Me, I'll stick by Johnny, here. Best trumpet since Bix."

"Bix, bax! Who cares. And how did we get on the subject of trumpet players?" Peter asked angrily.

"Now Peter," the girl warned gently. "Remember your blood pressure."

Peter sighed. "All right, my dear. Now then. You!"

"The name is Slim, Send-me Slim."

"Send-me Slim?" Peter asked hesitantly.

"Yeah. On account a hot lick sends me. Right outa this world. Oh ride it, Johnny boy!" Slim said ecstatically.

"It was true that music sent you out of your world," Peter said. "And it might send you out of this one, too. But of that, later. Your occupation?"

"I was a bum."

"Well, you'll have to change your habits here," Peter warned. "The only bum things here are the jokes. And then only when Gabriel tells them."

Peter motioned toward the girl. "Jane will take care of you from now on," he said, returning to some papers on his desk.

"This way, please," Jane said.

SHE turned and went out of the room through a side door. The two men followed. The door opened into a corridor, down which the three walked until at a turn they came to another door. Jane opened this one and stood to one side as Slim and Johnny entered. She followed them in and closed the door.

"The outfitting room," she explained. "Halos, wings and the rest. You'll find dressing rooms in there," she continued, as she took down several garments, two pairs of wings and two halos from a shelf in the corner. These she handed to the two men. They took them and went into the little cubicle.

"How do I look?" Slim asked.

"Like you're ready for bed," Johnny said. "But what I want to know is, how do we get these wings on?"

Jane's voice came through the closed door. "Just place them against your shoulder blades. And put the halo above your head and let go."

Slim's eyes widened in wonder as Johnny followed her instructions. The halo floated above his head as though it were held there by invisible strings. And the wings had somehow attached themselves to his shoulder blades.

"Go ahead," Johnny said. "Try yours on."

"Do they fit?" Slim asked.

"Like a bass string on a violin," Johnny said.

"When you're dressed," Jane called through the partition, "come out."

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"You *do* look better," she said when they made their appearance.

But Slim noticed that she looked at Johnny when she said it. He found his hands reaching furtively for pockets that weren't there. If he only had a cigar, he thought. But this blessed nightgown. That was funny! He didn't think the word "blessed". But that was the word which came to his mind. Oh well.

"I might as well tell you what to expect of Heaven," Jane said. She teetered on her low-heeled shoes as she spoke. "We lead a *very* simple life up here. Music, small talk, games . . ."

"What kind of games?" Johnny wanted to know.

She blushed at the question. And looked away when she answered:

"Oh, charades and games like that. And once in a while we go to the movies. Educational stuff, you know. Of course there are other things to occupy the senses. There are picnics, for instance. In the Elysian Fields. Refreshments are served . . ."

"Refreshments?" Slim asked. "What kind?"

"Why nectar and ambrosia, of course. What other kinds would there be?"

Slim was tempted to tell her about Charley's place.

"Then there are the bands. Every one here must join one of them. And the choral society."

Slim became all ears at that. Bands. Did that mean he was going to play an instrument?

"Yes. I know, you don't have to tell me you don't know how to play. But you will play quite well the moment they give you an instrument."

They became aware of a low, throbbing sound on the air. Jane listened for an instant, then said:

"That was Gabriel calling. He's heard about your arrival and wants to meet you. Come."

Once more the corridor's vast stretch. And again a door which Jane opened for them. It was just another office, not quite so large as Peter's, nor again so business-like. The walls held portraits, some of which Johnny recognized. There was one, however, that puzzled him. But before he could question Jane about it, another door swung open and a man walked in.

GABRIEL was a tall, hale-looking individual with rosy cheeks, a short, white, immaculate beard and a twinkle in his eyes. He greeted Jane effusively, saying:

"My darling brings me tyros for my band, eh? Good. Good. Which one of you is Phlug?"

"I am," Johnny said.

"A trumpet man, eh?" Gabriel asked.

"Yes, sir."

"H'm. Well, we'll see. Yes indeed. We'll see. But first, let me see what you think of this."

Gabriel reached into one of the drawers of the desk and came up with the shiniest, brightest trumpet Johnny had ever seen.

"Listen," Gabriel said, "and tell me what you think of the tone."

He did a few runs, then launched into a strange, haunting melody. They listened carefully, but neither gave any sign of what they were thinking. At the end, Slim looked at Johnny, pursed his lips and said:

"He's got a Spivak lip, don'tcha think?"

"More like Lombardo. A little on the shmaltzy side. But not bad. Could of used him as a second man," Johnny said.

Gabriel's face wore a puzzled frown.

"Come, gentlemen," he said. "Make yourselves plain. What did you think of it?"

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"Look, grandpa," Johnny said, taking the trumpet from Gabriel. "I can't make myself clear in a language you'd understand. But with this I can."

He worked his lips for a second, placed the trumpet to his mouth, and prepared to let loose with such a blast as would blow Gabriel right out of the room.

"Send 'em, Johnny boy," Slim shouted as the first notes came out. "Send 'em!"

Johnny was only going to improvise. A sort of solo jam was all he had in mind. Instead, corn came out, corn as far as his elbow. He found himself playing a ballad and right from the book. The sweat stood out on his brow as he willed his lips to play something else. It was no use. He gave up finally. Slim regarded him with an expression that would have soured a persimmon.

Gabriel was entranced.

"My—dear—boy! What superb tone. What an excellent execution of a wonderfully sweet piece. Truly heavenly, the way you played. Isn't that so, Jane?"

Jane too was looking at Johnny as though he had suddenly pulled an imp from under his wings.

"Why Johnny Phlug," she said softly. "I can see where I . . . I mean where all the girls are going . . ." she broke off in confusion.

Gabriel chuckled and chucked her under the chin.

"Looks like you've made a conquest, my boy," he said. "And you're the first who has, as far as Jane's concerned. Ha, ha. It'll be the first time Peter's ever lost a receptionist to a trumpet man. Man! Am I going to rib him."

Slim shook his head in disapproval as Gabriel broke into his thoughts.

"And now, young man, let me hear how well *you* can do."

"Me?" Slim asked in surprise.

"And why not? We all play up here. Come, now."

Slim took the trumpet in slightly quivering fingers. He handled it as though it were a piece of fine crystal ware. Aping Johnny's manner, he too pursed his lips as he had seen the other do, then, putting the trumpet to his mouth, Slim closed his eyes and began to blow. The corniest hunk of stuff ever written, a piece named "You Are My Sunshine," smote the air. Slim dropped the trumpet in fright at the end of the last note.

"Tha-that wasn't me, was it?" he asked.

"Sorry to say, it was," Johnny said.

"Not bad at all," Gabriel seemed to be the only one who had enjoyed it.

"You liked it?" Slim asked in disgust.

"Oh, there were some mistakes. After all you're not the accomplished musician your friend is, that's certain. But I feel that with some practice you will be."

THERE was a short silence during which Slim contemplated an enternity of playing in a Heavenly band, a shmaltzy one at that. Johnny thought of the eternity he was going to spend with Jane. And Gabriel thought only of what he was going to say to Peter when he next saw him. It was Gabriel who broke the silence.

"Would you boys like to see our auditorium?"

They didn't say anything.

Gabriel smiled blandly and said, "Good. Just follow me. And thanks much, Jane, for bringing them to me."

Johnny was sure that her lips had pursed in a silent kiss to him as she left the room.

"Women," Gabriel said in a confidential whisper after the girl had gone,

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"are all right. But now and then they prove trying. Take my wife . . . Bless her. But every now and then she gets it into her head that I ought to better myself. Sort of gets to nagging at me that being the concertmaster of the heavenly choir is not the most important job in Heaven. Wants me to try to use some of my influential friends as stepping stones to something better. Like Peter's job, for instance. As though that's important."

He had been busily engaged of a sudden in straightening the pictures on the walls, while he talked. The two, not knowing what else to do, followed him around.

"Of course, with a man like Peter, one has to be careful. He has Almighty powerful connections. Of course I'm not without some, myself. Still—"

"I beg your pardon, sir," Johnny broke in. "But the pictures. Some I recognize. Some I don't. Now, there's Beethoven and Mozart and Wagner. But who is that long-nosed gent?" He pointed to an individual who was wearing a garland of leaves around his brow.

"Eh?" said Gabriel, turning with a start to the picture in question. "Oh. Him. That's Nero."

"Nero?" Johnny exclaimed in surprise. "How did he ever get into Heaven?"

"I forget," Gabriel said. "But I remember we needed a violinist at the time. And somehow or other a mistake was made in the record department and Nero got in. H'm! I'll never forget his tryout for the band. What shmaltz! Rome must have burned for shame of his playing. And what ego! He wouldn't play unless we burned some part of Heaven while he played. Luckily, the record department found their error."

Of all the nerve, Slim thought. This sweet-lip calling another shmaltzy. That was a Heavenly way to talk about someone. There it was again. He hadn't meant to say *Heavenly*.

"But I digress," Gabriel said. "We were going to go to the auditorium, weren't we? Through this door then, and presto, we are in the wings."

Gabriel pressed against a section of a wall. It slid open and the three passed through. Immediately, the most awe-inspiring sounds ever heard came to their ears.

"Peek through the curtain," Gabriel urged.

They were on an incredibly immense stage. There was a huge curtain drawn across it. The sound came from somewhere behind the curtain. Slim peeked through a tiny slit in the satin-like material. His throat tightened in an involuntary gasp.

Several years before, Slim had made the freights to Los Angeles. There he had seen the Hollywood Bowl. This was like looking into another such affair, only from the wrong end. But there was one difference. Size. It was beyond description, almost beyond comprehension. The tiers of seats stretched out in every direction as far as the eye could see. In each of those seats there was a musician who was playing. Never had Slim or Johnny heard such music.

"But is it swing?" Slim asked when they got back to Gabriel's office.

"Who cares?" Johnny asked.

Slim felt a great sadness steal over him at the question. His hero, the man he had idolized through years of radio listening, had failed him. A bell tolled in Slim's brain. He thought it was at the passing of greatness. But Gabriel told them it signified something else.

"Ah!" Gabriel breathed in satisfaction. "A picnic. How I love them. You must come along. The first picnic

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is always a treat. Further, I'll play a solo at this. They always ask me to, you know."

Slim wondered why Gabriel made it a point to say, "The first picnic is always a treat." Weren't the others also treats?

THE streets of Heaven were filled with people, all going to the Elysian Fields. Each face reflected the happiness it felt. Each mouth was open to let a song come forth. Then Gabriel and his two new musicians joined the throng. And the voices stilled; the brows darkened. Only Gabriel didn't notice the change. He was babbling of how he was "Going to put them in the aisles, this time."

The Elysian Fields were on the west side of Heaven. A huge crescent of roses above an immense, flower-bordered gate announced, "The Elysian Fields, west entrance." The crowd streamed in, Slim, Gabriel and Johnny with the rest. Booths had been set up here and there in the spacious grounds, dispensing nectar and ambrosia. Slim tasted some nectar and made a face.

"What's the matter?" Johnny asked. "No like?"

"Tastes like apple cider," Slim said. "Sour cider, at that."

A girlish giggle gave warning that Jane was near.

"How silly," she said. "Why, nectar is just wonderful."

Johnny gaped in open-mouthed admiration. Never had he imagined any one could look so beautiful.

"Nice halo you're wearing," Gabriel said. "And if I'm not mistaken, those are new wings."

She dimpled at the compliment.

"Yes, they are," she said. "I got them over at that new shop on Seraphim Boulevard. And I'd better tell you that your wife bought the most ravishing robe, although I must confess her taste is not quite to my liking. But I'm being catty."

Johnny didn't think so, it was evident. He assured her that, "Of course you're not."

But to Slim, the first wonder of Heaven had worn a little thin. Jane was like any earth woman to him. Something to stay away from.

"What's this about *buying* things here?" he demanded.

"We have to, you know," Jane explained. "The first wings, halo and robe are only temporary. They wear out, after all. Which reminds me. Tell Minerva that the new jeweler on the Milky Way has the most wonderful collection of halos I've ever seen."

"Nuts," Slim said. And walked away.

The last thing he heard was Gabriel assuring Johnny that, "Without boasting, my solo is the best thing on the program."

"His solo!" Slim grated. "I'd rather hear Spike Jones."

But no one heard him. They had walked off in the direction of a nectar booth. Slim walked the other way in disgust.

The picnic grounds were quite large, he discovered after walking for an interminable time. He became aware of a strong thirst and saw a crowded booth close by. It was the merriest gathering Slim had seen yet. The men and women were singing, arms about each other's shoulders. Slim decided to join them.

Slim shoved his way through them until he reached the booth itself. It was presided over by a woman. Something about her hair, the way her halo drooped in menacing conjunction with her right eye, the way she wore her wings, one tucked neatly in under her shoulder blade, the other standing stiff and straight, like a wind vane on a weather-beaten barn, her stained and

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badly-fitting robe, and above all the jolly good-nature of her asymmetrical features, intrigued Slim.

"Hello," he said in shy tones.

She looked him over, nodded her head, which made the halo droop even more, a condition she corrected by flicking a finger at it, making it go up as high as it had been low, then bestowed a wink on him with a leaden-colored eyelid.

"Hi sugar," she said softly.

He smiled shyly.

"Does honey-boy want a itsy-bitsy drink?" she asked.

"He sure do," Slim said. The smile was less shy now.

"Well then, give yourself a treat with this," she said, handing him a huge tumbler of the amber-colored liquid.

He sipped hesitantly at the drink, then threw caution to the winds. This stuff hit the spot. He drained the tumbler in three swallows. Slim had to admit, "It's mellow as a cello," when the woman asked how it was.

"Then have another and get that bass feeling," was her suggestion.

SLIM was no longer hesitant. He accepted the glass with a broad smile, and the woman returned the smile, leaning her top-heavy curves over the wooden counter.

"How come I ain't seen you around before?" she asked.

"Just got in. But from the looks of this place, I'm not going to be a stranger long."

"I don't like a long stranger. I'd rather have a short friend," she said. "Get it?"

Slim got it but hoped that one would be the last.

"Look, tootz," he said. "How's about you and me sort of getting away from all this?"

"What for?" she asked.

"I didn't say four," Slim said. "Jus' you'n me."

"I said what *for?*"

"Who're the other two?" Slim was altogether at sea now.

"What two?"

"No. Wha' four?"

She lifted her curves from the counter top and stared fixedly at Slim. A broad smile dimpled her cheeks.

"My sugar candy's a little stiffy," she murmured to herself. Then to Slim, "Look daddy. Let's you and me go for a walk."

"Nah. Le's have another li'l drink ambro-ambrosia."

She didn't reply to Slim's suggestion. Instead, she lifted a section of the counter and came out from behind it. Taking Slim's arm she steered a course toward one of the entrances.

"Where we goin'?" Slim asked after they had walked for a while. The effect of his drinks had begun to wear off.

"Why, to my place of course," she said.

He grinned at her. There was something in her blood-shot eyes that stirred Slim's pulses. A promise, a something that made his blood leap with desire. But after her first intimate look, she gave all her attention to steering Slim. He was in that half-stage between being drunk and getting sober. His surroundings were a blur to him. So that when they arrived at her place, it was only a blurred image to him.

"Up we go, dearie," she said, hoisting him up the single flight of stairs.

Slim shook his head and cleared the cobwebs from it. He looked about the room. It was a nice, homey room. Pictures of Peter, Gabriel and several others whom he didn't know adorned the walls. A small phonograph stood in the corner. He looked up at the sound of approaching footsteps. He recognized her when she came into the room.

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"Ah!" he said with satisfaction, when he saw the two brimming glasses she was carrying.

"I thought you'd be thirsty," she said, depositing the glasses on a tray beside the plush-covered sofa. "Come here, sweet man. Sit by me."

Slim had one eye on her and the other on the ambrosia. He sidled over and sat beside her. She engulfed him with a mountainous arm and gripped him tight.

"Like it here, daddy?" she asked.

"Uh huh," Slim replied, squirming in her grasp in an effort to get to his drink.

She held him even more closely.

"I like a man what likes his pleasures," she said.

"That's fine," Slim groaned.

"Yep. I have to admit I do. Most of these boys around here are so busy *spouting* good they forget a gal gets a little lonely now and then. Now you ain't that kind, are you dearie?"

"Nah," Slim said. He had gotten his hand loose and his fingers were straining toward the glass.

She intercepted it and held his hand.

"Now you and me, we're going to have a bit of fun, aren't we?" she asked.

SLIM began to wish she'd shut her trap, or if that wasn't possible, to fill it with some liquid. He liked her better behind the counter.

"I asked you something," she said. Her voice held an edge to it.

"Sure," Slim said in agreement. "Sure. But what say? Let's have a drink, first."

She was agreeable. The ambrosia tasted like whiskey. Slim smacked his lips and regarded her with a fonder look. She wasn't so bad after all.

He told her so. "Y'know," he said, "down on Earth I didn't go much for the opposite sex! Or maybe they didn't go for me. But you, you're different. I gotta admit, you're different."

"You like me, huh?"

"Yep. I like you. I like this place. In fact, I like everything about this." His hand had gone up in a gesture embracing the whole room.

She clapped her hands in delight.

"Oh daddy! You're wonderful. I know it. I just know it. We're going to be so happy together. Now hurry dear and finish your drink. We've got to get to Michael before it's too late."

"Michael? Who's he?" Slim asked.

"The keeper of the records," she said. "After all, if we're going to be married we have to let him know."

"Married," Slim quavered. "Why . . . why we hardly know each other."

"What difference does that make?"

"But, uh, but suppose we, uh, well look! I might have some habits you might not like."

"Oh don't worry about that," she said. "I'll change those."

Love flew out of the window. Slim had her number. The bossy type. Oh, no. Not for him. But how was he to get out of this mess? He turned his mind desperately to the problem. The only thing he could think of was music. He almost snapped his fingers in delight. The phonograph. She must like music if she had one.

"I see you like music," he said slyly.

"Love it," she said. "But then, every one up here does. I imagine you play, don't you?"

"Sure," he said. "The trumpet. What do you play?"

"The marimba, of course," she answered. "Such a divine instrument."

Slim made a face. Where had the woman of the counter gone. It was all a snare, a delusion. She had only acted that way to trap him. She suddenly bounced from the sofa.

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"Now you just wait here, dearie. I'll be right back."

She was back before Slim had a chance to move from the sofa. She came in, wheeling a marimba stand with one hand, the other held a trumpet case.

"Now," she said, as she wheeled the marimba up in front of him, "I have a trumpet right here. Isn't that nice?"

"Yeah," Slim agreed sourly.

"I had a boy friend once who played the trumpet. A lovely man." She sighed windily. "He fell in love with some ratty looking gal with glasses. Sang in the choir, an impossible person, really. He left in a hurry one night, and forgot his instrument. Lucky for you."

Slim groaned. But not aloud. His plan had to go over.

She opened the case, disclosing a gold-plated trumpet, and taking it out handed it to Slim. Then she took the sticks from the rack and executed a few runs.

"Now what will we play?" she asked.

"Anything you like," Slim said, placing the trumpet to his mouth. "I'll take the harmony."

Just as he expected, she launched into something sweetly sticky. His intentions were to give it a good ride. Instead, perfect harmony came out. The trumpet drooped from listless fingers when they were done.

"Now what will it be?" she asked.

"Another drink," he said desperately.

She filled the glasses, once, twice and another time. Then she arose once more. There was a familiar gleam in her eyes.

Slim was disgusted. All this wasn't getting him anywhere. Besides, he was getting sleepy.

"Ah! T'hell with it!" he shouted.

THERE was a sound as of a thousand thunders rolled into one. Slim staggered back, his ears and senses reeling from the great noise. His vision blurred, there were great flashes of purple-colored lightning; the firmament of Heaven seemed about to tear itself apart and Slim fell to the ground.

There was the sound of voices in his ears, as Slim felt life return to him. He opened his eyes and looked dazedly about him. He was in court again, was his first impression. Then he realized that if he was, it was in some court he'd never known before. Yet, that it was a court, he had no doubt. There was the judge's bench right there in front of him. And surely that man in the robe was the judge. Slim looked at the man standing at the judge's side and recognized Peter.

But this wasn't the same, harassed little man he had met before. There was something fearsome about the way he looked down at Slim. Slim found his flesh was cold and the quivers that ran up and down his spine were from fear.

"So this is the culprit," the man on the bench said.

"Yes, Michael," Peter said.

"H'm. Looks harmless. But then most of them do, who come here. Can't say I blame you for letting him pass. If he hadn't blasphemed, no one would have been the wiser. Luckily for us he did. Had the Inner Council heard . . ."

"I understand, Michael," Peter said. "I imagine Gabriel would have liked my job."

Looks like I'm in the soup, Slim thought. Well then, let them do what they want! That was the way he felt at first. But as they continued to talk about him as though he were a stick of wood, anger flooded his being. Who did they think they were?

"Just a minute," his voice was peremptory.

They turned cold-looking, judicial

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faces toward him.

"Seems like I broke the law or something," Slim said. "But even back where I come from they tell a man what he did and let him make a plea before they sentence him."

Michal looked questioningly at Peter and Peter returned the glance. They nodded in silent agreement. It was Peter who enlightened Slim to the crime he committed.

"You came here under false pretenses," Peter said.

"Did no such thing," Slim said. "I was brought here! Which makes whoever did the bringing, the guilty one. I'm just being railroaded."

"Whoever comes here," Peter said sharply, "knows that he is deserving of Heaven. What made you think you were?"

"To tell you the truth, I didn't think much one way or the other about it. About all I thought of down there, was music."

"We know that, now," Michael took up the burden of the prosecution. "The point is this, however. That having established yourself here, due to an unfortunate error, you violated one of the cardinal rules. Who knows but that you would have spent an eternity here but for that infraction."

"Whose fault is that?" Slim's voice was a loud screech. "Serving that ambrosia dynamite. One shot of that and Charley would have given the joint away."

"Had you stuck to nectar, temptation would not have come your way," Michael said in reminder. "It is one way in which we catch those who do not belong here."

Slim was tired of the whole business. "Ahh! I don't think Heaven's such a hot place anyway. I'd only have to listen to a lot of corny lips, like Gabriel. I gotta admit that that gal I met at the ambrosia stand was all right. But she was only a stooge."

"If it is heat you're interested in," Michael said, "I think we can satisfy you in that respect."

"Go ahead," Slim said defiantly.

In an instant the room, the men, everything turned black before Slim's eyes. There was the sound of clashing gears and Slim opened his eyes to find he was in another scene, another world.

IT WAS another office. This one, however, was furnished in modern decor. A tremendous desk of lined oak, simple in design, was shoved close to one wall. Another smaller desk stood along the wall at right angles to the large desk. A slender, sharp-looking individual sat at the large desk. He was regarding Slim with a steady, sardonic stare. A neatly-trimmed moustache adorned his lip and his hair, worn pompadour style, was slicked back until it was like a gleaming black helmet on his rather narrow skull.

"I see we have another caller, Mercedes," the man said to the girl.

Slim noticed the girl for the first time and a low whistle of admiration came involuntarily from his lips. She was a slick chick, if ever he had seen one. Raven-black hair fell in smooth waves down the back of her neck. Her face was triangular in shape and milky-white in complexion. She wore no make-up other than lipstick and eyebrow penciling. Her teeth gleamed whitely as she smiled up at Slim.

"Yes, sir," the girl said, turning from her inspection of Slim and picking up several papers from the desk. She began to read, "His name is Send-me Slim. According to the file the messenger arrived a little late and found that he had been sent to the other place by mistake. Actually, he is only a probationer. But it seems that he offended the dignity of

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our smug friends up there. So they sent him here."

The man arched his fingers before his eyes and spoke between them:

"Very interesting. Ve-ry interesting. Now tell me, friend, what was your vocation down on Earth?"

"I was a bum," Slim replied.

"Good. Excellent. Now then. We like to make our visitors at home, here. Was there anything you liked to do down there, I mean some particular vice that you indulged in?"

Slim hesitated, then took the bull by the horns:

"Look, mister," he said desperately. "The only thing I was interested in back there, was music. Wait a minute," he stopped the other before he could interrupt. "Not any kind. Just swing. I could listen to it all the time."

"So," the man said. "You hear that, Mercedes? We have a musician in our midst. An addict of swing."

Smoke suddenly curled from his nostrils and he coughed discreetly behind a palm, sending out a small tongue of fire when he did so. "Very well, Slim," he continued. "We are a very nice group down here. A busy little group. Busy hands make healthy bodies, is our motto. So I'm going to put you in our musical department. You'd like that, wouldn't you, Slim?"

"Not if it's like Heaven, I wouldn't," Slim said.

"Oh, those psalm singers," the man said deprecatingly.

Slim was beginning to like this man.

"No indeed," the man continued. "No psalm singing here. I'll have someone here directly."

He pushed a button on his desk and in a few seconds a short, broad-shouldered man came into the room. He curled his tail up until it was resting on his shoulder and said:

"Yes, mighty Lucifer?"

"A guest. For the music room. Show him around."

"By the way," the guide said, as they left the room and started down a wide, red-papered corridor, "my name is Beelzie."

"Glad to know you," Slim said. "My name is—"

"No one asked you," Beelzie said abruptly.

Slim sniffed sharply. An oddly acrid odor came to his nostrils.

"What's that smell?" he asked.

"Brimstone and hell-fire. Lovely odor, isn't it?"

Slim's only comment was a hearty, "Phew!"

"Oh," said Beelzie, "you'll get used to it. And speaking of smells, get a load of that, kid."

They had reached a turn in the corridor and Slim found himself staring over an immense lake of brimstone. Tiny streamers of smoke curled from the blackened cinders. A great number of people were walking about; on their shoulders they carried sacks which they dumped into an immense pile. A conveyor belt ran through the pile and scooped up the deposits and carried it back to where the men and women were working.

"What in hell are they doing?" Slim asked.

"They are all those who in life kept saying, 'that's like carrying coals to Newcastle.' Aren't we the damnedest people?"

They passed the brimstone lake and came to a closed door from behind which Slim heard a vast clicking sound.

"Oh. You just must see this," Beelzie said.

HE OPENED the door and he and Slim passed down a long aisle. Desks on which typewriters stood lined the aisle. Men sat, stooped in concen-

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trated work over the typewriters.

"This is the *silliest* thing!" Beelzie said. "Just look at this."

He picked up one of the typewritten pages one of the men had finished and handed it to Slim. The typist didn't even look up, but inserted another sheet and started typing anew.

Slim read: *Sorry, but this duplicates material on hand.*

"What's so funny about that?" Slim asked.

"Well," said Beelzie. "In the morning they write a story and in the afternoon they do this."

Slim looked blank.

"You just *don't* have a sense of humor, do you? Why, they pass those rejections around among themselves."

"But who are they?"

"Editors, silly, editors!"

They passed through the door at the other end of the room and Slim saw that they were on the doorstep to what looked like a broadcasting studio. Beelzie opened the door and they stepped inside. A light flashed and a sign lit up. Silence, the sign said. But either Beelzie couldn't read or he didn't see the sign. He kept babbling.

"Now here is one of our prize attractions. See that man?"

A tall, slender man stood before a microphone. A set of earphones was clamped around his ears. He held a huge pile of manuscripts in his hand. Slim heard the loud-speaker blare, "Is that your figure, Vera, or did you get lost in a washing machine?"

Slim realized that the man at the mike had told the joke. Slim had to chuckle. But the man at the mike didn't think it was so funny. An expression of intense pain crossed his features.

"That's enough of him," Beelzie said, hurrying Slim from the room.

Slim looked wonderingly at the other.

"He was a radio comic. Now he's doomed to listening to his own jokes."

"This is Hell, isn't it?" Slim said.

"And now we come to the part that will interest you. The music chamber."

It was a square, box-like room. Slim wondered what all the phonographs were doing there. He counted them. An even hundred all together.

"Nice, isn't it?" Beelzie said.

Of a sudden, Slim felt that something was wrong here. He turned and looked hard at the imp. But the imp wasn't looking at Slim. He was looking at his wrist watch.

"Oh dear!" Beelzie exclaimed. "You haven't much time. You'd better get to work."

"Work? What am I supposed to do?"

"See those phonographs? Well, each of them has a swing classic on the turntable. Your job is to keep the spring wound, that's all."

"That's all?" Slim asked.

"Well, there's more to it than that. But you've just got time to get them all going. I wouldn't wait if I were you."

Somehow, Slim received the impression that if he didn't, there'd be hell to pay. He raced around the room like mad winding up each spring. It was as Beelzie had said. Each turntable had a swing classic. The trouble was, that by the time he got to the last, the first had unwound, and the sharp music had given way to a screeching sound that seemed to tear at his very entrails. When he got back to the first and started to turn the handle, a stream of liquid fire leaped out of the sound box and engulfed him. Yet in spite of the pain, Slim found he had to get it wound before he could leave it.

There it was, all the music he loved, but he was doomed never to hear all of it played. As Slim panted to himself, this was a Hell of a place!

THE END

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Kashmir Fire Walker

☆ By Ralph Benton ☆

KUDA BUX, the Kashmir magician, was perhaps the most puzzling wonder-monger from a land which specializes in retailing magic. In Surrey, England, he walked barefooted and unharmed through a pit of burning embers. A young Englishman who tried to imitate him took two steps and leaped from the coals with badly burned feet.

Two fire walking tests were made just ten days apart by Kuda Bux. The first was conducted by a professional magician who specialized in exposing psychic frauds. The second test was made by members of the University of London Council for Psychical Research and other scientific men.

A trench which was twenty-five feet long, three feet wide and twelve inches deep was filled with oak logs and pine firewood and stacks of newspapers. Over all this was poured ten gallons of kerosene, then the whole thing was ignited. After the fire had burned for an hour and the oak logs had turned to embers, a load of charcoal was spread over the top. When this became a mass of red embers, Kuda Bux stepped into the trench. He did not run, but walked deliberately, back and forth through the twenty-five foot trench of glowing coals four times. Physicians were on hand to examine his feet, but they did not find a trace of a blister.

The second test was prepared much in the same manner. There were two trenches and he walked through each twice, his feet remaining in contact with the live embers five seconds at a time.

Science can find no explanation for this feat. The skin on Kuda Bux's feet was no thicker than that of other men. He said that he had walked through fire as much as six times a day without feeling any discomfort. There were no callouses or blisters on his skin, yet other men who have tried to duplicate his act have leaped from the pit with permanent injuries. This Indian magician certainly possessed a talent which was unique.

* * *

The Ghostly Fragrance

☆ By Pete Bogg ☆

IN THE year of 1871 the dethroned Emperor Napoleon III and his wife and son Louis fled to England where they were received graciously by Queen Victoria. A few years later, the son was given a commission in the British regiment that was sent to South Africa. There, in the jungles of Natal, he was killed in a skirmish with the Zulas. This was in 1879. A search party was sent out to recover the body. They gave it a temporary burial and covered the grave with a huge pile of stones to mark the spot.

Six years before, Napoleon died, and the widow, Eugénie had a mausoleum built for him in Farnborough. When she heard the tragic news of her son's death, she was determined to have the body of her only child lay beside that of his father in the vault. She decided to go for the body in person.

During the next year, Eugénie set out for Africa, accompanied by two fine Englishmen, Sir Evelyn Wood and Dr. Scott. After suffering many hardships, they finally reached the jungles of Zululand where her son had been killed. They hired guides, among them men who had buried the young prince. They searched the dense jungle for days, and soon it became apparent that the guides were bewildered. They went first one way and then another and finally confessed that they did not know where the grave was. Engénie and her friends were depressed to think that they had made such an arduous journey into the Dark Continent all for naught. They were walled in on all sides by dense jungle and there seemed to be nothing to do but admit failure and return home. Suddenly Eugénie's face became radiant and she cried out, "This is the way." She turned and dashed off through the jungle like a young animal. She plunged along in a straight line with utter disregard for the dense undergrowth. When the two Englishmen caught up with her, she was on her knees digging in the earth. There, completely overgrown by bushes so as to hide it from view, was the cairn.

When her companions asked her how she knew where it was, she said that she was suddenly nearly overcome by the strong scent of violets. It was so heavy that she nearly fainted from it, but as she breathed it in, it seemed to draw her along and she felt no pain as she dashed headlong through the jungle. She knew she was on the right track. It seems that her young son had had a passion for violets, and violet scented cologne was all he ever used. The odor of the violets had led her straight to the object of her search and then faded away. This was indeed a ghostly fragrance.

* * *

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UNFORESEEN by Roger P. Graham

The robot knew that as long as life existed his race was in peril — but could *all* living matter be destroyed? . . .

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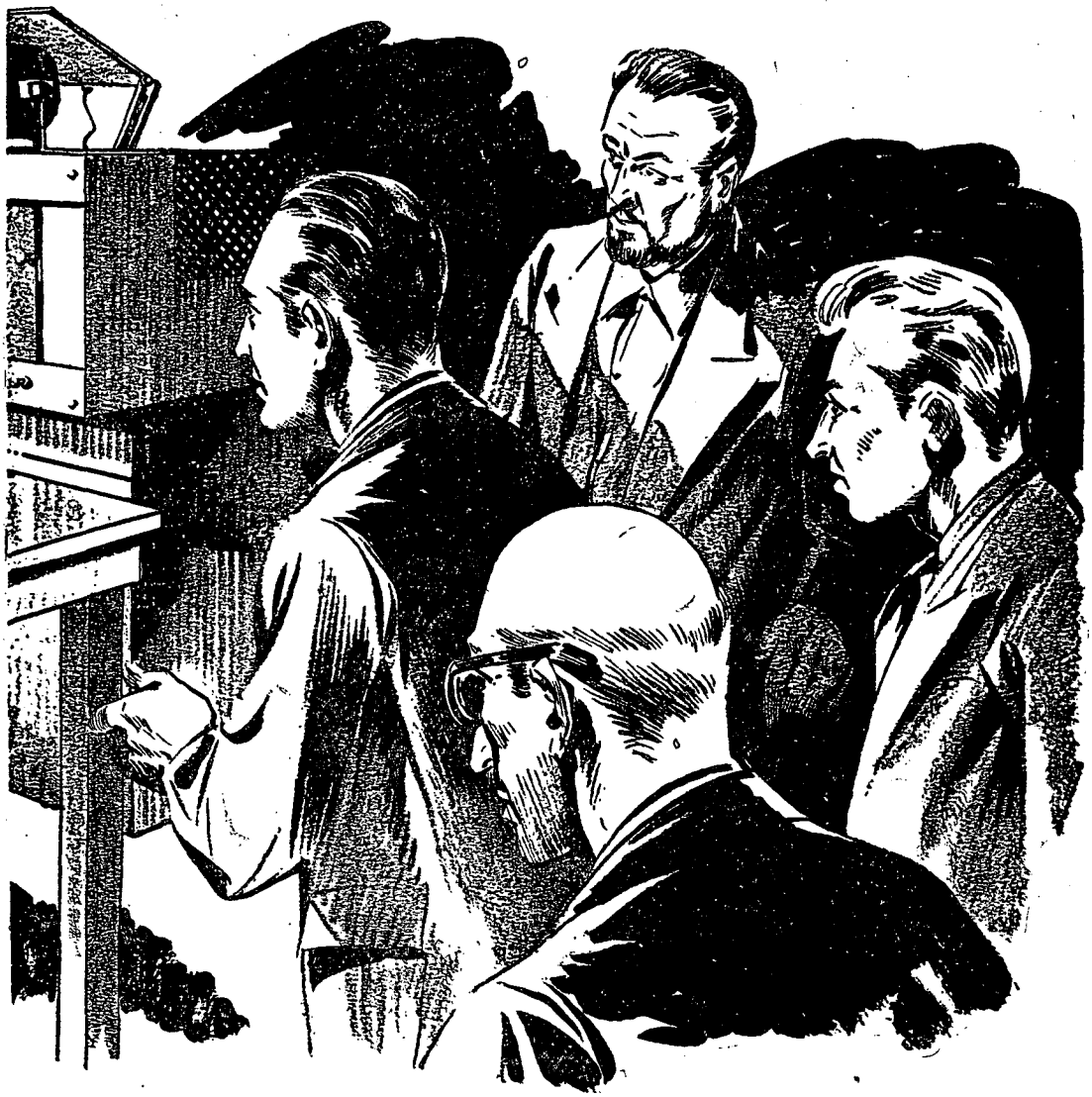
PROFESSOR HORACE JONES turned his eyes anxiously to the large athletic figure walking with effortless smoothness at his side.

"Are you sure you will be able to function properly, Rob?" he asked doubtfully.

"Of course, professor," Rob replied with a tolerant smile. "Although you created me you have no real conception of the complexity OR the reliability of my mechanism. I assure you that it is far more dependable than yours." The robot glanced pityingly at the tired, stooped shoulders of Professor Jones, the fragile, susceptible organism that was his body, always in need of expensive nourishment.

"I—I guess you're right," Horace Jones said doubtfully. "Maybe my doubts came from the fact that I made you, and I don't have too much confidence in myself or my work."

"You've done very well, Professor,"



Rob lifted his head off his neck and set it down on the table

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Rob said sincerely. "Your humility is hardly supported by the facts—namely, me." He chuckled throatily, his plastic face responding to the emotion of mirth with a perfect simulation of human good nature.

"This interview will mean a lot to me," Horace Jones said worriedly. "If everything goes right I will be acclaimed the greatest living scientist, as your creator."

"That's right," Rob said gently. "Don't worry so. I won't let you down. As a matter of fact, I'm looking forward to it."

The two turned into the massive portal of the government building. Side by side they walked across the marble floor to the elevator bank. In a few moments they were outside the door of the office they had come so far to enter.

It was Rob who turned the knob and pushed the door open. He held it open for Professor Horace Jones to pass, then followed him in.

Rob saw that the professor's knees were beginning to wobble slightly. He took him by the arm and led him up to the reception desk.

The girl at the desk stopped chewing her gum as she took a good look at Rob. Unconsciously her hand stole up to make sure her hair was in place.

"Professor Horace Jones and his robot experimental model, by appointment," Rob answered the girl's questioning look.

"Go right in, Professor," the girl said, not taking her eyes off Rob. "They're expecting you." She fluttered her eyes daintily and bit coyly on her gum.

ROB and Horace came to a stop just inside the door. Several men were standing about, their eyes staring in puzzled concentration.

"Which one of you is the robot?" one of them asked doubtfully.

"I am," Rob said, smiling. "And this is Professor Horace Jones, the man who created me."

There were several minutes of introductions and conversation. Rob took part with perfect poise, his humor matching that of the wittiest of them, his conduct equal to the most gentlemanly.

Slowly Horace began to feel at ease under this treatment. A sparkle of enjoyment appeared in his eyes. He expanded under the admiring looks of the assembled government scientists as Rob took off his clothing and displayed his robot body, unadorned by flesh and skin-muscle where it was not exposed to view when properly dressed.

After half an hour Rob put his clothes on again. The scientists took seats around the wall, and Horace prepared to make his selling speech.

"Rob, as I call him," he began, glancing affectionately at his creation, "first began about five years ago. During the fifteen years preceding that I had worked on and solved the circuit principle of the human brain, and determined the properties of the component parts of the brain. What I wanted to do was reproduce the human brain in all its functions in non-living matter.

"As you can see, I succeeded. Rob's brain is an almost infinitely complex structure, created by a combination of the process of metal plating and crystalization. The resultant brain functioned on a principle of accumulation of electric charge in microscopic condenser cells. The charging and discharging of these minute condensers produces the mental activity. The details of operation are so complex that there would be no hope of convincing anyone the principle is correct except by the actual presence of such a non-organic brain in good working order,

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in a robot body. Rob is that proof."

One of the government men held up a hand for the floor. Horace nodded and stopped talking.

"As you know, Professor," this man said, "it was found that the hard radiations of space were what killed all living creatures that left our atmosphere. It is well known that these same hard radiations have a property of discharging condensers. How do you know that Rob's brain will not be affected by them out in space?"

Horace, instead of answering, turned and looked knowingly at Rob. Taking his cue, Rob went to a desk and, placing both hands carefully on either side of his head, raised it straight into the air.

As it slid up a smooth cylinder came into sight. The hands lifted the head free and set it on the table. Then the robot body walked about the room casually while Rob's head watched it.

"You see," Horace explained. "With a living person the whole body must be protected by a lead sheathing. With a robot only the brain need be protected. A robot placed in the pilot room of a space ship can leave his head in a place of safety and control his body perfectly without being exposed to radiations. On landing someplace, he can again put his head and body together for leaving the ship."

"We will of course have to conduct intelligence tests and other tests," another voice spoke up. "I believe, though, that you have the answer to the problem of space flight."

"Of course I have," Horace said. "With crews of others like Rob we can man space ships to go to the other planets and come back with details and with specimens."

"But we want MORE than that," another voice spoke up hastily. "We want robots that can carry on complicated surveys, explore for minerals, even build up a robot civilization, since space travel is out for living beings. We can manufacture millions of robots for this."

A more practical voice spoke above the many trying to talk at once.

"Suppose we run Rob through the aptitude and intelligence tests," it suggested.

Rob was led away through a side door while Horace was forced to remain behind. The moment the robot was gone the voices took a different slant.

"Of course," one said dryly. "You have built some sort of control into Rob so that if he turns dangerous he can be easily destroyed, perhaps by a radio signal. They must all be built that way. Otherwise we might eventually face a robot civilization able to destroy us and maintain itself without us."

PANIC bit at Horace's soul. It suddenly struck him that if he told these men the truth they would object very strenuously and insist that Rob be destroyed at once. He knew he would rather die himself than have that happen.

"Oh yes," he said knowingly. "However, that is my secret, at present. You needn't fear. I would not have built such a strong, intelligent robot without controls in case he became hostile. He doesn't know of them, though. I wanted to see how he would develop without knowledge of the fact that I can destroy his mind almost by a thought. So far he has proven very upright and cooperative in everything."

"How long will it take for you to start production on these robots, assuming we find that this one fulfills all requirements and no more experimental work is necessary?" another voice piped up.

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"I already have a hundred well past the critical stage in manufacture," Horace admitted. "They can be completed in a couple of months. After that it will take at least two years to synthesize their minds to the point where they are as capable as an adult."

"Two years!" came a chorus of voices. "That long?"

"I think that a remarkably short period," Horace said with his first show of temper. "After all they start out like a newborn babe and have to discover their hands, feet, and other parts of their bodies. They have to learn just like a human baby, except that they are full size to start with. It takes several months for them to gain self awareness alone, and to know that they are thinking beings."

"Can't all those things be built in, like the instincts of animals?"

"Hardly," Horace said.

The argument ended abruptly with Rob's return and the announcement that he had passed all tests.

Arrangements were made for a later meeting with Horace to settle financial and business arrangements. Horace and Rob shook hands with everyone and left.

As they crossed the outer office the girl behind the desk called out, "Oh, Professor!"

PROFESSOR HORACE JONES stared bleakly through the magnifying glass at the gel encased robot cranium. Tensely watching were several robots identical with Rob except in features.

"We can only hope," Horace said sadly, "that the radiations of space will kill the infection. Another six months, Rob, and it would be necessary to drain out the gel and replace it. That would mean the complete loss of the stored charges in your brain. That would be the end of you, Rob. The new mind that would be built up in your place would no more be you than are the minds of the other robots."

"It would be—death for me?" Rob asked.

"Yes," Horace replied. "And we've proven that this contamination is produced by only one thing, a radiation released by living protoplasm. No matter how we seal in and sterilize the gel necessary for the functioning of your brain, this radiation seeps in and starts the deterioration. So long as you and the other robots remain near living matter you will die in a few years. You will have to take the space ship to some planet where there is no life at all, and stay there.

"We can't tell the others—the humans who are paying for all this. It will have to simply look like an accident. That will be easy. If you drop out of sight, and I disappear with my secret of how to make a robot brain, no more will be made on Earth."

Horace looked over the assembly of quiet, subdued robots.

"Fortunately I have taught you all how to make others like you, so that you can perpetuate your race by making more and more robots. You can go on where the human race leaves off, building a civilization that will spread over the universe. Just remember that planets where life exists are death to you. The radiations of living protoplasm, no matter how you try to insulate yourselves from them, will destroy the gel in which your brain rests. And no other substance has the same properties as that gel."

"But all you planned for us to do for the human race?" Rob protested as Horace skillfully glued the plastiskin back over the braincase of his first robot creation.

"Won't matter," Horace said. "In

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fact, the human race is doomed. It isn't generally known, but the experiments at Oak Ridge that synthesized element 103 have doomed us. That is why the government has been so anxious to make contact with other planets.

"In the past five years since 103 was first synthesized it has slowly expanded until today there is no hope of stopping its progress. They told me all this when I told them it would take a couple of years to produce a robot crew for the ship."

Rob sat up slowly.

"You haven't said anything about that to us," he said. "Tell us more."

"103," Horace began, "is unlike other elements. It takes lesser elements and develops into super atoms until it reaches element 206, when it splits in half and becomes two of 103. This takes almost a year, so that a little oftener than once a year the total amount of 103 is doubled. In the steps from 103 to 206 there is a lot of atomic action that produces heat and radiation.

"Already, at Oak Ridge, there are nearly fourteen ounces of 103. Next year there will be twenty-eight ounces. And it's impossible to pick it up and shoot it off into space. It's so hot that it melts anything that touches it. In a few decades the existing 103 will turn the Earth into a molten, gaseous sun, which devours every bit of matter that falls into it. The 103 will sink and form the central core. Eventually the gasses will reach out and drag in the moon to add to the fire."

"I'm sorry," Rob said sadly. "But you? Can't we come back after we find a habitable planet and take you there?"

"No," Horace Jones replied harshly. "My presence would destroy your race wherever you go. My body is nothing but protoplasm, which gives off radiations as fatal to you as the radiations of radioactivity are to life. You must pick a completely sterile world or you won't survive."

"Then when we leave the Earth it will be good-bye?" Rob asked.

"Yes," Horace said. "Don't feel too bad about it. I'm too old to live much longer anyway."

"You'll never die for us," Rob said seriously. "We'll keep the memory of you alive forever. You are our Creator."

TWO days later the sleek cigar-shaped space ship parted the air into the heavens and sped away, while atom scientists paused in their war against the hungry 103 dissolved in the molten mixture of metal and lava that had once been Oak Ridge. And a lonely figure waved sadly from the roof of his laboratory as the ship carrying his creatures flashed overhead, its trail of white rocket gasses hanging stationary in the atmosphere to mark the path it had taken.

Only Horace knew that the ship would never return. The others were all filled with speculations and hopes of what the robots would bring back with them on their return.

Horace was eulogized in every newspaper in the world. Even as he stood on the roof of his laboratory bidding silent farewell to his robots, a host of professional biographers were busy combing his letter files and diary, compiling the history of this great scientist, this savior of humanity, this pioneer of history, this genius.

From a hidden vantage spot an enterprising camera man was taking a newsreel shot of Professor Horace Jones waving touchingly at his robots as they went where humans could not follow—as yet.

While, at Oak Ridge, radiation-

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burned scientists fought, and government censorship kept the hopeless struggle out of the newspapers.

ROB gazed thoughtfully through the huge telescope on Pluto's highest mountain. It was turned toward the Earth, which glowed with a dull redness of its own.

It had been eight hundred years since he and his fellows had landed on this outermost of all planets in the solar system. It was as far as they could get from the coming catastrophe which would pull in most of the inner planets.

With his superior intellect he had known far more than Horace Jones had guessed. He had determined, for example, the critical temperature at which superheated steam would break up into monatomic hydrogen and oxygen, tripling its volume in one giant, nova-like explosion.

He had further determined that the gravitational attraction of the Earth, transformed into almost pure 103, would increase several times over what it had been for the same mass of ordinary stuff.

The gaseous envelope would take in the moon quickly, and then Mars and Venus. In another few centuries the solar system would have two suns.

Already all life was gone from the Earth. Its crust was crumbling in the last few stubborn areas where it had resisted until the very end.

He turned at last from the telescope and went back to the giant city teeming with robots of all forms and descriptions. In each of them was a brain similar to his. In each of those brains was a mind, the resultant of millions of minute charges on microscopic condenser plates built up and separated by a process of metal plating and crystallization.

Each of the robots was essentially human in its makeup; but the norm was slowly moving away from the human pattern. Without sex, the robot mind tended to become more emotionless and more stable. With extinction something that came only by accident, the normal robot intelligence grew far more adult than the human norm had been, so that purely human things held little attraction any more than playing with a toy would have satisfied a grown human when there were human beings on the Earth.

Rob saw this gradual drift away from human standards, in himself as well as others. It was inevitable. And though he would always hold Professor Horace Jones above all else in the universe in his estimation, he was being forgotten by the others of the original space ship crew, and was frankly frowned upon by the robots built since their arrival on Pluto.

They considered him a superstition which the original robots had invented to account for the insoluble riddle of how the first robot was made. Since he couldn't have made himself, he must have been created by some other agency. Since it took elaborate equipment not found in nature, this Creator must have been intelligent. It if were a robot the riddle would just be pushed back and not answered, so a fabulous creature that had "evolved" from brute matter in some way was the invented Creator.

Rob knew that these views were never expressed in the presence of the original hundred. Such disrespect would have been unthought of. But the "truth" of the matter, that there simply had been no First Robot, but that they went back to infinity, was firmly entrenched in the popular mind.

There had been one robot, Rob remembered, Jack Johnson, who had been brave enough and foolhardy enough to

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try to get the hundred to admit the deception and confess where they had come from so they could all return to the home planet of the robots.

The hundred had made an example of him, draining out his gel and blanking his mind. No one ever mentioned Jack Johnson. Rob had not liked this treatment of the first insurgent. The will of the majority had ruled, however, as it always did.

Rob had foreseen that such treatment would never end such thoughts but merely drive them underground where they couldn't be seen. He had raised this objection and been overruled. The others had answered that the truth will triumph over everything, and the only way to deal with falsehood is destroy it ruthlessly.

The ninety-nine pointed with satisfaction to the results, the cessation of atheistic doctrine in the press, the sudden surge of enthusiastic acceptance of the truth.

Rob had looked suspiciously behind the bland exteriors of the robot population and wondered just what was going on. As the years passed he forgot his uneasiness. He knew the underground movement was now organized and active. It seemed destined to remain underground, so perhaps it would never prove a threat. Perhaps—

The metal dart punctured his cranium and ended his mental existence without warning. Other robots rushed to his assistance too late.

The one who had sent the dart was never discovered, just as no one ever discovered who had killed the other ninety-nine of the ruling group.

THE leaders of the underground stepped nobly into the breach caused by the tragic ending of the hundred and set up a democracy. The first act of the new President was to order the statue of Professor Horace Jones destroyed. With the symbol of the Creator destroyed all superstitious beliefs lost ground.

With democracy in full force, ungoverned by obsolete ideas, expansion over the planet progressed rapidly. The population increased from ten million when the hundred ceased to exist, to eighty-three billion, in a thousand years.

Science advanced apace. Nuclear physics had gone on from its first beginnings. The danger of element 103 was known. The planet Pluto would never fall victim to it.

Space travel was common, though none of the other planets were worth trying to settle on. Ships were being made that might penetrate space to other star systems eventually.

For centuries hundreds of rocket ships had scoured the spaceways for asteroids of valuable substances.

Astronomy discovered other systems with a double sun. It was proven by one great scientist that the only way a planet such as Pluto could be produced was by the sideswiping of two suns, which caused them to lose their escape velocities and to throw off huge blobs of matter which cooled into planets.

Values changed. It finally became law that any individual had a right to existence for only three hundred years. At the end of that time he was destroyed.

Periods of wiping out the superstitions of the past from time to time destroyed all libraries of the original hundred. Beliefs changed subtly. Eventually it was believed that the robot race had always existed on Pluto and had never come from some other place.

The superstition that the race had come from one of the two central suns long ago and been created by a God that lived in that sun became part of

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the folklore of the ancients, to be read for entertainment only.

IN ONE final experiment the basic nature of the universe was solved. The postulates were quickly synthesized into a mathematical structure which agreed in every detail with every known aspect of nuclear physics.

One after another the last unknown laws of nature were uncovered, by figuring on paper instead of experimenting in laboratories. The greatest revolution was in space ship construction. The old rocket principle was obsolete, replaced by the new ether-drive principle which consumed no energy at all.

Immediately huge space ships were placed under construction. Each was sixteen miles in diameter, capable of housing five million robots comfortably. They were constructed in special space workshops circling Pluto, the metals for their construction drawn from the vast storehouses of satellite stations where the asteroid miners sold their finds.

Smaller experimental ships with the new drive principle soon began replacing the old solar cruisers. These new ships brought out the bugs in the drive principle so that in the large interstellar ships the drive was perfect.

The ancient dream or legend of an original home in some other solar system far across the galaxy was born anew. Volunteers for the trip were more than plentiful. When it was learned that the law of death at three hundred years would be lifted on space travelers everyone on Pluto volunteered.

The lucky ones were finally chosen by lot.

During the fifty years it took to complete all the ships science had marched forward to its final fruition. Everything was known about the basic operations of reality.

Even in the field of chemistry the experimental method was becoming obsolete except as verification of answers found in calculations. Atoms and molecules became compact equations. Molecular equations became a field of compatible atomic field patterns, a branch of mathematics.

The announcement of the date of departure of the fleet of interstellar ships created only a momentary flurry of excitement alongside the many startling discoveries in all branches of science.

Newspapers and television were filled with complex equations instead of words. It was predicted that shortly there would remain nothing unknown. Every possibility open to reality would be discovered by the exhaustive process, as billions of highly skilled mathematicians worked day and night in a race to be listed among the immortals of Ultimate Science.

THE Day came. The millions had been already transported to the waiting ships, circling like moons about the planet. The admirals of the fleet were all of the waiting pilgrims present at the giant celebration in the central capitol.

The President himself gave the farewell speech which lasted for ten hours and covered every possibility of what might be discovered in this maiden journey away from the solar system.

During his long speech he seemed to be hiding something. Subdued speculation was rampant as the speech progressed. Whatever it might be, it was quite evident that he intended to save it for the last.

News commentators over the television, kibitzing softly so as not to drown out the voice of the President,

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were almost unanimous in agreeing that some new honor had been devised. Perhaps a new medal had been designed. Perhaps a new rank had been created for these fleet admirals.

Finally, after nine hours and forty-five minutes, the President paused for a dramatic five minutes while tension built up.

"And now," he finally said, "I have an announcement to make that is almost as important as this pioneer flight across interstellar space itself. Just this morning I was notified that a major scientific development has taken place that opens up a vast new field of research. Where it will lead is anyone's guess at present, which is itself startling in this day of complete knowledge.

"This discovery comes at an especially proper moment. We are all envious of these pilgrims into space. Envious of the unlimited opportunities for discovery open to them but not to us. This new discovery has come to comfort us, and to give us opportunities equal to those of the space travelers, though in a different line of exploration.

"A new type reaction in chemistry has been discovered, revealing hitherto unsuspected properties of the element, carbon. Already seven distinct substances have been created having this new type reaction, and more are expected to come.

"This new type reaction is best called self-synthesis, for in it the new substances reproduce themselves out of the substances of their environment. These substances are tremendously complex, consisting of hundreds of thousands of atoms to a single molecule. They take the simple substances of their environment and add to themselves until they reach the stage where they split and become two identical molecules.

"The six substances that followed the first were developed from the first by ordinary reactions. Each of these new types increases the possible variations, and is more complex in structure than the original substance."

He smiled triumphantly at the space admirals.

"We no longer need to envy you your special opportunities for discovery," he concluded. "When you get back we may have even greater discoveries to reveal to you than you to us. Who knows what *blessings* this new field of chemistry will open up to us!"

And on the far side of Pluto a scientist, having accumulated too much of one of the new substances, dumped a quart of it down the drain. It followed the drain pipe to a nearby river, and made its way to the nearest ocean where, unsuspected by the robot civilization, it multiplied and mutated until . . . But then it was too late. Protoplasm is tenacious.

Scot Custom

★ **By Jon Barry** ★

A FUNERAL custom still prevalent in some sections of Scotland, is to carry the casket of the deceased out of the house through a hole in the wall instead of through the door. Then the hole is sealed up immediately after it has served its purpose. This is to prevent the ghost from re-entering the house because the one opening that the ghost knows about is no longer there.

Weird Vampire

★ **By J. R. Marks** ★

A VAMPIRE BAT—There is a species of bats living in the American tropics which actually does drink blood, as do the vampires of European mythology. This vampire bat does not suck blood, but drinks it. It will light silently on a sleeping animal or human being, carefully make a small, almost painless, incision, then lap up the blood which flows.

* * *

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It Was Brillig

★ By John Lane ★

AN EXAMINATION of a bibliography of science-fiction and fantasy today will disclose any number of fiction stories whose theme is out of this world. More and more people, including the literary experts as well as the plain everyday reader, are being attracted to it. The popular "slick" magazines are going along with the increased interest in science and fantasy and are publishing numerous stories of these types.

Most people however are surprised to know that they've read a lot of fantasy even before they were aware that it had such a classification. H. Rider Haggard's "She" and a host of other books may be classified properly as fantasy.

The world's most famous fantasy, one which in its way will probably live as long as Shakespeare's plays or as long as the English language is spoken or printed, is that fantasy, the immortal "Alice In Wonderland"—and its sequel, "Through The Looking-Glass." The Author, Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, or as he preferred, "Lewis Carroll," unlike most fantasy authors might be described as a strange blend of mathematician and dreamer.

Ostensibly he wrote "Alice In Wonderland" for a little girl, one of the many children whom he enjoyed more than adults—their society, he felt was so much more sincere even if naive.

While it *is* a child's story, it is a great deal more. Men have studied that work in detail, and have come to the conclusion that there is more in it than meets the casual eye. It is not only one of the most beautifully written books in the English language—the style is still regarded as a perfect model of English composition—but it is fascinating, not in a weird or strange way, but in a perfectly natural way.

Many great scientists, including two of the best astrophysicists who ever lived, Sir Arthur Eddington and Sir James Jeans, were extremely fond of drawing on quotations from "Alice" in order to illustrate points and analogies in the enormously popular and sound scientific works. The reason for this is not hard to find.

Probably the first description—couched of course in vague, illusory, beautiful terms—of a fourth-dimensional translation of a human being, is given in "Through the Looking-Glass." Similarly, many of Alice's other adventures have scientific and mathematical overtones. An examination of Carroll's complete works in addition to the two most famous, convinces us that his strange mathematical bend was forever creeping into his delightful fictional pieces. Scattered here and there like plums in a pudding,

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you will come upon dozens of paradoxes and puzzles, cleverly disguised and masked—and extremely intriguing.

Through Alice's adventures in "Through the Looking-Glass" an entire chess problem is concealed. The funny and amusing discussions Alice has with the odd creatures that inhabit the book, are really vehicles for profound observations. Of course it can be maintained that the reader is reading into the expressions what he desires to, but so many of the oddities are found by everyone that we can rest assured that it was intentional to include them.

These fantasies have modified the English language itself. Who has not used the expression "as mad as a Hatter" or "as mad as a March Hare?" There are hosts of others of course. The books and the plays made from them are continually repeated year in and year out with no diminution of interest on the spectators' parts. At present Hollywood is working on a movie version—a new one—of "Alice In Wonderland." It goes without saying that it will be a "wonder!"

* * *

Return Of The Dead

★ By Cal Webb ☆

CAPTAIN MARRYATT had a peculiar experience while serving in the navy as the commanding officer of a small ship in the Burmese war. One night while his ship was at anchor, he saw someone come into his room. He thought that it was a thief, so he jumped out of bed to grab him. By the light of the moon, he saw that it was his brother and saw him walk to the side of the berth. He said, "Fred, I have come to tell you that I am dead!" Then he disappeared and Marryatt got out his log book and wrote down all the details of this strange vision. When he returned to England, he was told that his brother had died at the same hour that he had appeared on the ship.

One evening Dr. VanDyke and Mr. Campbell were visiting their friend, Dr. Worcester. They all had taken summer cottages in the same Maine village. After a time Mr. Campbell said that it was time for him to go back to his cottage for the night. About half an hour had gone by after he left when Dr. Worcester saw Campbell pass through the room. Dr. VanDyke didn't see him, but he felt his presence for a couple minutes. They both had the feeling that something had happened to Campbell, so they rushed over to his cottage and found that he had dropped dead with a heart attack.

There are numerous accounts of apparitions appearing at the hour of death. There is a theory that these visions are a form of mental telepathy.

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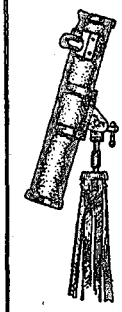

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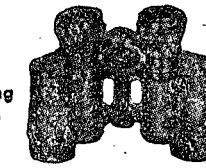

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At the hour of death, the afflicted one's mind turns for a last thought of its children and loved ones. This might cause a thought form in the mind of the object of that thought if he were a sensitive person. This thought form would be an apparition or vision created by telepathy.

A mother and daughter are the principal characters in this example of telepathy. The daughter was the wife of the Dean of a cathedral in the Middle West. One summer night while she was sleeping on an enclosed porch, she was awakened by thoughts of her mother. She sat up and looked out across the meadow in the gray dawn. There she saw her mother walking along the path in the meadow. Her face seemed to radiate joy as she hastened to the other side, lifting her skirts to keep them off the heavy dew. At the other end of the path stood two figures with outstretched arms which the daughter recognized as her father and a sister who had been dead for several years. As the mother reached her husband and daughter, the vision disappeared. She looked at her watch and saw that it was four-thirty. The next morning at breakfast she told her husband that she was afraid her mother was dead. He assured her that it was only a dream, but while they were still at the table, the phone rang. It was a relative who told them that the mother had died at four-thirty that morning.

The next experience deals with a mother and son, but it is different in that the son was taken to the death-bed of his mother instead of the mother appearing to him. This was told by the naturalist, George Cherrie, who speaks of it as a dream. It was October the tenth, 1892, after he retired for the night in an inn in Costa Rica. He was aroused by a dream that took him back to his boyhood home. He was met at the door by a woman in black who led him into his mother's bedroom. He saw her lying between two windows, her face reflecting the utter peace of death. This same vision appeared to him three times during the night, and he knew that his mother must be dead. In the morning, he put down the details of his dream in his diary. Several weeks later he had a letter from his sister telling of the death of their mother on the night of October tenth. When he returned home, his sister confirmed every detail of his vision.

The wife of Reverend Arthur Bellamy of Bristol, England, made a pact with a schoolgirl friend in her youth that whoever died first should appear to the other in death if possible. The two were separated for many years before Mrs. Bellamy heard of her friend's death. A few nights later Mr. Bellamy awoke suddenly and saw a strange woman sitting by his wife's bed just looking at his wife. He lighted a candle and saw the stranger distinctly for several minutes before she vanished. When his wife awakened, he described the woman in detail, and she knew that it was her friend who had returned to visit her in death.

* * *

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READER'S PAGE

THOSE WHEELS AGAIN

Sirs:

I just finished reading Tom Brewer's letter in the October FA, giving his explanation of "The Incredible Wheels." It seems a shame to blast such a neat explanation, but . . .

Captain Gabe of the steamship Bintang encountered one of the wheels in the Straits of Malacca. This wheel was so vast that only a half of the wheel could be seen, the center lying near the horizon. Now I ask you, what kind of screw could stir up something like that? And what's more, the wheel was in *front* of the boat!

Phosphorescence? Captain Breyer of the steamship Valentijn met a wheel in the South China Sea. His wheel wasn't even in the water. It was suspended above it.

Sorry, Tom, think up a better one.

Mrs. B. E. Smith,
320 E. Magnolia,
Stockton, Calif.

Thanks for the new information on those "Incredible Wheels," Mrs. Smith. We won't add anything here, except to say that as yet science has offered no valid proof as to whether or not the wheels were of natural origin. Anybody else care to give an opinion?.....Ed.

MYSTERY TOWER

Sirs:

First off, I'd like to comment on one particular story in the November FA. "The Charming Mr. Grant," while a short story, really rang the bell with me. All honors to Lester Barclay.

Lately I visited Newport, Rhode Island's famous "Mystery Tower," said to have been built as a church in the late 1700's. Excavators sought in vain for a clue to its real origin. Now to my point. I think that somebody should write a story about it. It is known in Rhode Island as the "Old Stone Mill," built entirely of stone, with sealed windows except for a few exposed apertures—without glass. Birds gather by the hundreds and "haunt" the old tower. I visited it on a rainy day, and the birds, hovering about the tower, looked like vultures to me. . . . Seems like a good place for a fantasy writer to "hatch" a plot. In case anybody is interested, the tower is located in Truro Park, Newport, R. I.

Mrs. Muriel E. Eddy,
125 Pearl St.,
Providence, R. I.

If we know our fantasy writers, Muriel, Newport will be crowded during the next few weeks. Sounds like a good place to hold a seance.....Ed.

OKAY, SO WE ASKED

Sirs:

At the end of the letter section in the November FA you said, "Let's hear from you!" Okay, but don't say you didn't ask!

I liked Kohn's cover for the November issue. It wasn't garish or filled with rip-roaring action. Nice and quiet for a change. But I still think that Jones is tops.

"Dimensions Unlimited" was below Livingston's standard. He has done far better. Mostly, this was just a clash, clang, sword-blood-and-guts-action story. As I say, he's done better.

"Death's Head" is a disgrace to Geier's name. *This* after "Forever Is Too Long"?—and his many other great stories. How could he do it?

"The Spirit of Toffee" was the only top-notch story in the issue. Charles Myers continues to roll us in the aisles with his hilarious accounts of the madcap doings of Toffee & Co. This guy George is quite a character, too. Hope Myers will keep them coming.

Vance's story, like McGivern's, was stereotyped. Sorry, boys, but you too have done a lot better in the past. Barclay's yarn wasn't up to par, either. It was just a bit confused in the end of the story.

I'm being honest with my opinions, so you'll have to take them for what they're worth. If this letter is published, let me hasten to nip in the bud those guys who will say, "If you don't like the mag, why buy it?" Answer: This mag has published some darned good stories despite the low average stuff that creeps in. So I keep on getting it waiting for more stories like "Forever Is Too Long?" and "Lair of the Grimalkin." That's why.

On this love interest business: I agree with Linda Bowles. Leave the goo to the myriad of love mags cluttering up the newsstands. We want stf—fantasy stories in FA. If people want this love goo they can go out and buy True Goo Stories.

That's enough of that, but if anyone starts yapping for strong love interest, I'll be on their neck right quick!

Next issue sounds good. Lee Francis usually turns out a decent story. So I'll be waiting patiently for next month to roll around.

Ed Cox,
4 Spring Street,
Lubec, Maine.

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Well, Ed, guess our request bore fruit—you did write in! We're sorry you didn't think the whole November issue was up to snuff, but we are glad you liked the "Toffee" story. Just as a sort of sneak preview, we'll let you in on a big secret. Charles Myers has just turned in a new long novelette featuring your favorite character. The title? "Toffee Turns the Trick." Keep your eyes peeled for it, it's the best thing Myers has done to date.

As to the love-goo point—just what have you got against the gals, Ed? We kinda go for them ourselves! (The line forms at your local newsstand.) Anyway, thanks for your criticisms, Ed, and we'll be waiting to hear from you again..Ed.

THE FA INSPIRATION

Sirs:

Settle back, 'cause this is a long one.

First of all, thank you. This, I'm sure, will need explaining, so here goes.

This is the first time I have ever written you, but I'll bet I've read your mag as long as any fan my age has. I've meant to write before, but just never seemed to get around to it. Now, again, the thanks.

You see, I'm a student at U.S.C. (I'm sure you heard of our last episode in the Rose Bowl!) and I'm preparing to become a Concert pianist. I don't suppose many people are aware of the mental attitude necessary in preparing for a career of this kind, but I can assure you it leaves much to be desired. The long, tedious hours necessary for practice keep one alone most of the time. But, of course, there are compensations. And that's where FA fits in. Your magazine appeals to the "dreamer" in me. I really enjoy stories written by people who can let their imagination run loose. You can't live with Brahms, Beethoven, and Chopin and be a completely normal person. (If you want to call a "dreamer" out of the ordinary.) But to perform a great work of art you must be a little different, so you also must have some stimulus to feed on. That's what stf does for me.

FA is wonderful. Of course, there are stories sometimes that aren't too good, but I will say that you do get constantly better. And especially in FA I like the Reader's Page. Wish it were a lot bigger. Maybe you'll think it unusual, but before I gave my last concert I was pretty nervous, and only reading FA kept me in shape. I guess that's about as big a compliment as I can give you.

If there are any fans who are interested in music, I'd like to correspond with them. How about the gal fans? . . . Well, I'll close with another thank you for helping me pass some otherwise dull hours.

Peter R. Gregg,
10320 S. LaSalle Ave.,
Los Angeles 44, Calif.

It's been a real pleasure hearing from you, Gregg, and we feel highly honored that you give FA such a fine place in your life. We'll certainly try and keep up the good work. As to Brahms,

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Beethoven and Chopin, your editors think it would be mighty hard to find any better people to live with. We've spent many an enjoyable hour listening to Schnabel's rendition of the "Emperor Concerto." Who knows, maybe some day we'll have the pleasure of hearing you play it.....Ed.

GREAT "TRUTH" IN FICTION

Sirs:

During the past fifteen years I have read very little science or fantasy fiction. Yet, when I saw the October issue of FA on the newsstand, I was drawn irresistibly to it. After investigating the contents of your magazine I was pleasantly surprised to find that it consisted of what I will call "psychic science-fiction." So, naturally, I bought a copy and read it.

"This Way to Heaven" held my interest as no recent best-seller has. Mr. Sherman has compounded the most important of current world development into a story that deviates so little from what many of our best minds have reason to believe is the truth of the situation that it may in the not too far distant future be classified as prophetic rather than fantastic!

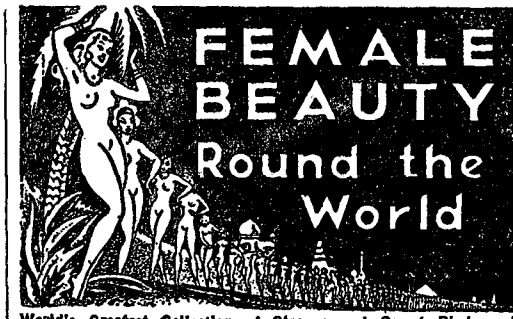
Telepathy, clairvoyance, and psychokinetics have been proven by experiments at Duke University. Spiritualism is rapidly proving its claims, not to the general public yet, but to those who are interested enough to make open-minded investigations. The "cold war" between Russia and the United States is not so much a conflict between two different peoples as between two groups of military leaders. Yes, with these thoughts in mind, "This Way to Heaven" was more, much more than just a story.

Neither is "The Pruning Man" fantastic to anyone with genuine psychic experience. This story hit me slap-dab on my center of interest. There is nothing I would rather do than engage in psychic experiments such as Mr. Williams has so ably written about.

If you continue to publish a majority of stories which one can read with the feeling that "here is a fictional treatment of a great truth," then I will become one of your most avid readers.

William R. Wells, Jr.,
Box 815,
Tipton, Okla.

Welcome into the fold, Bill. We're mighty glad to know that you think so highly of FA after just one reading. As to the great truth in fiction, all we've got to say is that AMAZING STORIES, our companion magazine, predicted not only the atom bomb years before it was produced by modern science, but also radar, the V rockets, and other developments too numerous to mention. As to the "psychic" field, well, that's something we can't claim proof for, but, like you, we feel that in a great many of the stories that appear in FA, there are more truths than meet the eye. Maybe some day we'll be able to say more, but for the present, rest assured that you'll find all the reading pleasure you want in FA. We can guarantee



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that. .....Ed.

RIDICULOUS?

Sirs:

Mentioning Shaver and Lovecraft in the same breath is ridiculous—blasphemous. There is no comparison. There should be no attempt to make any comparison.

May I say that your authors are in a rut?

Obviously you enjoy printing letters from people "praising" your magazine. My, my. If you'd print an original story now and then I, too, would be inclined to bow.

Con Pederson,
705 W. Kelso,
Inglewood, Calif.

Mentioning Shaver and Lovecraft in the same breath may indeed be ridiculous—to you. But we'd like to point out that there are many readers who feel a similarity of spirit in the stories of the two writers. We make no flat claims as to peerage of any authors. We may point out certain similarities we feel exist, but in this case, you are making an unjust accusation. Also, those who feel that you can class the two authors in question together are entitled to their opinion, just as you are. As the old saying goes, "what is one person's food may be another's poison."

You are right when you say we enjoy printing letters praising our magazine. (We wish we could print them all!) But we also enjoy printing honest criticisms, too. Along those lines we wish you had been a little more specific about what you call an "original" story.

In any event, we feel sure that we'll get that bow from you one of these days. .....Ed.

WANTS BACK ISSUES

Sirs:

I have just finished reading the October issue of FA. I'm writing primarily to ask if any readers have back copies of Shaver stories that were published prior to "Witch of the Andes." Most of them appeared in F's companion magazine *Amazing Stories*. If so, please contact me.

Now for the October number. The cover was good, best since the April issue. Bob Jones has that "master's" touch.

"This Way to Heaven" was very good. Sherman is almost as good as my hero, Richard Shaver.

"Ernest's Evil Entity" was something I really enjoyed. Good for Harris.

"The Well-Wisher" was one of those stories that you don't forget. I'd like to see more of Kamins.

"The Pruning Man" had "that certain something" that made it a top yarn.

Now to something else. I'd like to know who your artists are. Why don't you print their name on the drawings? They deserve credit.

Dixie Lee Lynch,
28 Main St.,
Greenwich, Ohio.

We're going to have to wave a reprimanding finger at you, Dixie. We always publish the artist's

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name—right on the contents page. But, on the other hand, we'll also take that as a compliment—you never have to look at the contents page because you know every story will be top-notch! Okay, so we'll take that finger back again. . . . Ed.

NEW READER REPORT

Sirs:

I am a comparatively new reader of FA. The first copy I bought was the May '48 issue. Therefore, I'll review all the mags from that date to let you know how the stories have rated with me. May, 1948:

"Forgotten Worlds" by Chandler was incredibly mediocre. I couldn't get my mind on it.

"The Watching Eyes" by Williams was the finest story in the issue. A fascinating plot and excellent writing.

"You Bet Your Life" by Arno was fair. A rather worn out plot.

"My World Died Tonight" by Case was superlative.

June, 1948:

"The Black Arrow" was dull reading for me.

"The Tavern Knight" by Tenneshaw—never, again, please!

"Shadow for Sale" hit a new low for Geier. Too bad Virgil Finlay wasted his talents illustrating this one.

"I Wake Up Dreaming"—ugh!

"The Ominous Bequest" by Kastel—very good! A welcome change from the rest of the yarns.

"The Tides of Time" by Chandler—excellent. Those last two stories made the issue worthwhile.

July, 1948:

"Queen of the Panther World" by Livingston was an excellent story.

"Mirrors of the Queen" was bad for Shaver.

"Contract for a Body" by Marlowe—just fair.

"Air Race" by Kastel—phooey! (What happened to Kastel on this one?)

August, 1948:

"The Man from Yesterday" by Lee Francis was superlative—except for the ending. Avar should never have been killed.

"Unfinished Business" by Sharp—should have been on Inner Sanctum Mysteries.

"Tanya's Night to Howl" was just fair.

"Tomorrow I Die" ditto.

September, 1948:

"The Lavender Vine of Death" by Wilcox was super! More like it! Reminded me somewhat of Burroughs' "The Mad King."

"Dark Wish" by McGivern—routine.

"Hildy Finds His Wings" by Hickey—left a bad taste in my mouth.

"The Key" by Livingston—excellent.

"Reggie and the Vampire" by Vance—good. Shades of Wodehouse!

"Freddie Funk's Flippant Fairies"—oh no!

October, 1948:

"This Way to Heaven" by Sherman—excellent! I couldn't put it down!

"Ernest's Evil Entity" by Harris—fair.

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"The Well-Wisher" by Kamins—what a lousy title for a good yarn.

"The Pruning Man" by Williams—fair.

Well, that takes care of the issues to date. Sorry I had to write fair to so many of them, but that's the way they struck me. However, the top-notch stories you do run more than make up for the fair ones.

Now I'd like to make a request. I'd like to start a little poll among the readers of FA to sort of rate all the stories in each issue, and get an idea of how a large group of people feel about them. Don't you think this is a good idea? Well, I'd like to have all those interested drop me a line on each current issue, rating the stories one, two, three, and so on, and reasons for rating. Then I'd pass the results along to the Reader's Page."

By the way, I have a copy of Wells' "The Croquet Player" and also a first edition of F. Marion Crawford's "The Witch of Prague" (circa 1891) and also a copy of "Speak of the Devil" by North and Bontell. I will trade all three of these books for a copy of "Marginalia" by Lovecraft, or "Lost Worlds" by Smith.

Well, guess I've taken up pretty much of your space, but I did want to give you a new reader's report. I'll be seeing you soon.

Bennie Jacopetti,
1892 Green St.,
San Francisco, Calif.

Glad to have you with us, Bennie. And while you did rate a lot of stories fair, you were just as generous with your excellents and superlatives, so we take it you kinda like FA at that! As to your poll, we'll be more than glad to publish the results you get, so how about it, gang, drop Bennie a line. .....Ed.

TEARS IN HIS EYES

Sirs:

I'm not ashamed to admit that after I finished reading "This Way to Heaven" in the October FA, I had tears in my eyes.

I've been reading both *Amazing Stories* and FA for a little over a year now, but Harold Sherman's novel was the very best story I read in either magazine. It really moved me deeply.

If you want to know who my three favorite authors in FA are, that's easy: First, Sherman, then Rog Phillips and Richard S. Shaver.

Thanks for a really great story.

Henry Mendocha,
220 E. 7th St.,
New York 9, N. Y.

Sherman's story was every bit as good as you say, Henry, so you don't have to feel ashamed for liking it so well. And your favorites are three top writers in our opinion, too. .....Ed.

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